bone tomahawk

by s. craig zahler

EXT. FLAT CLEARING NEAR A MOUNTAIN RIDGE - DAWN

A blade slides across the exposed throat of a MAN in a bedroll, eliciting a GRUNT. The victim struggles against a filthy hand that holds his skull firmly to the ground. Lying on the far side of a smoking campfire are two other dead men who stare at the sky with unblinking eyes, blood draining from their sliced-open necks. Standing above the butchered trio and holding long knives stained with gore are PURVIS, a lean forty-seven-year-old with a long pockmarked face, filthy overalls and cat pelts dangling from his belt and BUDDY, a dusty, potbellied forty-three-year-old brigand with oily hair, a wild beard and several teeth.

PURVIS
Why do they always wet themselves?

BUDDY
Get to the task.

Purvis turns away from the bodies and walks toward a blue rucksack that depends from a tree branch. Buddy goes in the opposite direction, leans over and picks up a green valise.

One of the bleeding men blinks and moves his right arm inside of his bedroll, slowly and cautiously. Against the inner fabric, the sighting of a hidden revolver SCRATCHES, but the noise is no louder than that of a gnat. The twenty-year-old REDHEADED FELLOW monitors the exposed backs of the brigands, blood draining from his cut throat, eyes filled with hate.

Purvis opens the hanging rucksack, looks inside and frowns.

PURVIS
They got books.

BUDDY
Shake ‘em out. See if they got money hidden in the pages.

PURVIS
It won’t be listed in the table of contents?

BUDDY
Save them jokes nobody likes for the campfire.

Purvis pouts, withdraws a book from the rucksack, turns it over and shakes it, FLAP, FLAP, FLAP. Buddy opens a monogrammed wooden box and views its contents-- three felt toothbrushes that have mother of pearl handles.

BUDDY (CONT'D)
Fancy.

He runs his tongue across his remaining teeth.

Behind him, the Redheaded Fellow, furious and trembling, withdraws his right elbow from the bedroll. The nose of his gun catches upon the inner fabric.

Purvis, shaking the book back and forth, frowns.

PURVIS
(disgusted)
Worthless.

The lank brigand tosses the tome into the smoldering fire and spots the Redheaded Fellow, who sees him and RIPS his gun from the bedroll. Buddy's heavy boot STOMPS on the dying man's wrist, driving the weapon to the ground, where it discharges, BANG, BANG, BANG.

A moment later, the potbellied brigand slams a heavy rock against his victim's face, CRACKING his skull, and wrests the revolver from his grasp.

Glaring at Purvis, Buddy pockets the gun and SPITS.

BUDDY
You didn't cut him deep enough.

PURVIS
He's got a lot of blood. An...an unusual amount.

BUDDY
He's got the same as every other. There're sixteen major veins in the neck and you gotta be sure and get 'em all.

PURVIS
There aren't sixteen.

BUDDY
An acquaintance of my Uncle was once a doctor and that's what he said.
(he SPITS into the fire, which HISSES)
Now get back to the task.

Purvis nods, pulls another tome from the hanging rucksack, shakes it back and forth and tosses it into the fire.

BUDDY (CONT'D)
Don’t throw no Bibles in there.

PURVIS
I know it’s bad luck.
(he withdraws a math book)
Plus you can always sell one to some idiot.

Buddy, gun in hand, unbuttons the Redheaded Fellow’s bedroll and pulls it wide, revealing the man’s beige union suit, which is stained with blood and urine. Beside the corpse’s dirty feet lies a little leather pouch, which CLINKS as the brigand lifts it with pinched fingers.

PURVIS (CONT'D)
I heard money.

BUDDY
Shake them books.

Buddy unbuttons another bedroll and inspects its gory and urine-soaked interior. Holding his breath, he rolls the corpse onto its side, which uncovers a plump grouch bag that he tosses into the green valise. Across the fire, Purvis withdraws a Bible from the sack and waggles it back and forth. Several dollar bills fall to the ground, and as he leans over to get them, he hears something.

PURVIS
Buddy. I hear horses.

BUDDY
You certain?

PURVIS
Positively. Listen.

HOOFBEATS resound very far away, dim but steady.

BUDDY
This is ‘cause of all them damn gunshots. A bat in China coulda heard that.

PURVIS
Sounds like a full gallop.

Buddy contemplates their predicament, looks around and sees a defile in the mountain range that lies to the east.

BUDDY
Need to get in them rocks and hide.

The brigands pack guns and provisions and flee from the campsite. In the far off distance, hooves RUMBLE.

EXT. INCLINED EDGE OF THE MOUNTAIN RIDGE - MOMENTS LATER

Buddy and Purvis, carrying the valise and the rucksack, hasten from the dirty grass onto a rocky incline, sweating and PANTING, running directly toward a darkened cleft. Presently, the lank brigand glances over his shoulder, sees a distant column of dust, and glances at the camp where lie the murdered trio.

PURVIS
Fifteen minutes ‘til they get there.

BUDDY
Scurry.

EXT. NARROW DEFILE IN THE RIDGE - MOMENTS LATER

Buddy enters the steep and sheer-walled defile, trailed by Purvis. Their GASPS and FOOTFALLS are multiplied by the strange acoustics, and together they sound like cavalry.

BUDDY
Gotta keep on. Need to be in good position-
(he GASPS)
-in case they pick up our trail.

Purvis follows Buddy up an incline, around a bend and onto a level stretch, where they slowly catch their breaths.

After a dozen strides, an EERIE WHISTLE echoes along the defile. The slender brigand surveys the area and looks at his partner.

PURVIS
You hear that?

BUDDY
It’s a gust.

PURVIS
It’s a real musical gust.

BUDDY
And?

PURVIS
It’s ominous.

BUDDY
This ain’t the time for womanly imaginings.

Buddy navigates a corner, climbs a small rise and rounds another bend, followed by Purvis. The potbellied brigand pauses, perplexed, and is joined by his lank partner. Affixed to the wall on either side of the defile are the skulls of two birds.

PURVIS
Are those buzzards?

BUDDY
Vultures, looks like.

PURVIS
This supposed to be a ‘Keep Out’ sign? Something like that?

Buddy brandishes his stolen revolver.

BUDDY
We got permission.

Presently, the potbellied fellow continues forward, followed by his partner, who grips his own purloined firearm. Within the defile, innumerable FOOTFALLS echo.

PURVIS
Are all those us?

BUDDY
Keep on.

The brigands continue along the defile and round another corner, and brilliant sunlight sears their eyes. Blinded, they stop.

PURVIS
I thought the sun was in the other direction.

BUDDY
It’s over here now.

Squinting and shading their eyes, the two men look ahead. In front of them, the narrow defile slopes up and opens into some wider, brightly-lit area that is invisible from their current vantage point. Buddy points his gun forward.

BUDDY (CONT'D)
Let’s.

They ascend the incline, PANTING, wiping sweat from their brows, reach the far end and stop. Beyond the tips of their boots lies a wide sunken area that is filled with leafless trees, pyramidal rock piles and poles that uphold various animal skulls.

Buddy points to an opening on the far side of the depression.

BUDDY (CONT'D)
That's where we're goin'. Past this place and deeper in.

PURVIS
Maybe we shouldn't pass through a place like that. Looks like a burial ground.

BUDDY
For a bunch of godless savages. Ain't nothing to concern a civilized man.

Buddy scratches his groin and SPITS. Purvis, wary, nods his head in assent. Buddy slides his gun into his belt, puts the valise on his shoulder and scrambles down the decline, across rubble and shale.

EXT. BURIAL GROUND - SAME

The potbellied man's boots impact the soil of the burial ground, and soon the lank brigand descends, sending a cascade of CLICKING stones before him. Purvis reaches Buddy, rights himself and dusts his clothing. Presently, the two men examine the walls of the sunken area and see a large dark hole on the eastern face-- the mouth of a cave.

PURVIS
A jail on fire is safer than here.

BUDDY
It's better than sittin' in that damn gulch, riders comin' from the one way and savages comin' from the other. You want to go back in there, go.

Buddy proceeds. Purvis SNORTS and follows, his wary eyes flickering in all directions.

Soon, the duo nears the ring of engraved flat black stones that encircles the burial ground. Buddy steps over it, trailed by Purvis.

Eyes alert and guns raised, the brigands wend piles of rocks and upright poles that buoy the skulls of birds and wolves.

Presently, Purvis sees a large leafless tree that has white fruit hanging from its branches. Upon closer inspection, he realizes that the dangling objects are actually human skulls, the domes of which are cracked open and filled with thorny weeds that ensnare small birds. The lank brigand looks away from the traps and follows his partner, anxious.

Something CLACKS within the cave mouth, startling the duo.

Buddy hastens toward the far side of the ring, succeeded by Purvis. The EERIE WHISTLE sounds, bright and clear, and both men run toward the far defile.

PURVIS
If that was a gust-
(he GASPS)
-it learned a instrument!

After ten strides, an EERIE WHISTLE blares directly in front of them, and they halt and stab their guns forward.

BUDDY
Listen clear! We're passin'
through no matter what! You hear?

The echo of Buddy's proclamation fades. Silence expands throughout the burial ground. Skulls twist on leather straps, and the sun illuminates rotting birds.

BUDDY (CONT'D)
You hear me? I'll kill any-

An arrow pierces Buddy's throat. He tries to scream, but can only GARGLE blood. After two backwards steps, he trips, falls and lands on his buttocks, THUD. Both brigands fire into the defile, BANG, BANG, BANG, BANG, BANG, BANG, BANG. Smoke fills the air, brightly illuminated by the sun.

Purvis scans the area, and Buddy grabs the arrow and pulls, ripping its tip--a bloody bird skull--from his neck.

PURVIS
Buddy!

Gore pours from the inch-wide hole in the potbellied brigand's throat, and he desperately CLAPS his hands to the wound. Beside him, the lank man stares, stunned.

Three EERIE WHISTLES blare. Purvis looks at Buddy and shakes his head, fearful and apologetic.

PURVIS (CONT'D)
Sorry. I'm sorry.

The potbellied brigand opens his mouth to speak, but can only GARGLE blood as his partner snatches the green valise from the dirt, turns around and runs, terrified. Behind him, an EERIE WHISTLE blares, and a pistol fires, BANG, BANG, BANG, followed by the CLINKS of its hammer striking used shells.

Purvis, running west, looks over his shoulder. Silhouetted in the gun smoke near the northeast defile is a huge man whose head is shaped like a WOLF SKULL swings a tomahawk into Buddy's stomach, SNAPS bone and pulls out long coils of intestines.

The terrified brigand averts his gaze and continues his wild beeline toward the western defile, knocking over wooden poles and scattering stones.

Titlecard: Eleven Days Later...

EXT. OUTER PERMITER OF BRIGHT HOPE - TWILIGHT

Suspended by brass rings from a tilted post is a sign that reads, 'Welcome! to Bright Hope -- Our Population is: 268.' Beyond the hand-painted proclamation and underneath a slender moon is a huddled collection of small, mismatched buildings.

INT. LIVING ROOM / O'DWYER HOUSE - SAME

The living room is furnished with lacquered tables and a cherry sofa and carpeted with two rose throw rugs that match the curtains. Seated upon the couch and reading a newspaper is ARTHUR O'DWYER, a handsome sun-bronzed twenty-nine-year-old with loose tan clothing, dishevelled light-brown hair, a sizable nose, a thick broom mustache, a frown and a swollen right shin that is bound by three wooden braces and propped up on a settee.

FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)
Would you like some coffee?

ARTHUR
No reason to stay up.
(he turns the page)
The more sleepin' I do, the quicker autumn'll get here.

Something SLAMS in the adjacent room.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)
Uh-oh.

FOOTFALLS resound throughout the house, and a tall twenty-seven-year-old woman, SAMANTHA O'DYWER, marches into the living room, pulling her wavy black hair away from her blue eyes, high cheekbones, small freckled nose and tightly pursed lips. A moment after she stops, the hem of her burgundy dress SWISHES and comes to rest.

SAMANTHA
Arthur O'Dwyer!

ARTHUR
You look real pretty when you're upset.

SAMANTHA
This isn't the time for compliments.

ARTHUR
Yes ma'am.

SAMANTHA
Do you intend to sit and sulk for the next twelve weeks?

ARTHUR
What do you want me to-

SAMANTHA
I advised you not to work on the roof during a storm, but you went up regardless-- because you "had a notion to get things done." But there's no reason to go over that again.

ARTHUR
Didn't you just?

SAMANTHA
So is this your intention?

ARTHUR
Is what my intention?

SAMANTHA
To sulk for twelve weeks?

ARTHUR
I'm not sulking, I'm sour.

SAMANTHA
Don't dodge.

ARTHUR
What do you want me to say?

Arthur shakes his head and sets his newspaper on the couch.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)
I moved-

SAMANTHA
Not on the sofa.

The man reclaims the paper and sets it on the floor.

ARTHUR
I moved beeves all over the map with all sorts of crews--from terrible to worse--to get this position. You know all that I've done. This was the big payoff, and now I'm stuck.

SAMANTHA
I understand how disappointing this is.

ARTHUR
Lots of guys never get to be foreman. And when I finally do, this happens-

Arthur points injured leg and shakes his head. Samantha sits on the sofa and puts her hand on her husband's left shoulder.

SAMANTHA
They'll be gone until autumn. And you're here-

ARTHUR
I know the situation.

SAMANTHA
With me. You're here with me for a longer duration than any time since we were married.
(quietly)
Can't you see that it's not all bad?

Arthur takes his wife's hand and kisses it gently.

ARTHUR
Of course I can.

Samantha smiles, pleased and a little bit embarrassed by their discussion.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)
And not just ‘cause you’re prettier than most cows.

SAMANTHA
“Most?”

ARTHUR
You never saw Jessica.

Samantha pinches Arthur’s shoulder, and he LAUGHS.

EXT. OUTER PERIMETER OF BRIGHT HOPE - DUSK

A few hundred yards west of the town sign, a dark FIGURE digs a hole in the ground with a spade.

INT. THE LEARNED GOAT SALOON - NIGHT

The Learned Goat is a raised saloon, furnished with a long bar, a dozen stools, several tables and a warped piano at which sits a small PIANIST, a bald oldster whose unconscious head lies upon a pillow that covers three octaves. Beside the musician’s left shoulder is a bucket with a sign that reads, ‘1 song 3¢. 2 songs 6¢. 3 songs 10¢.’ CLARENCE, a fair and paunchy fellow of fifty years, wearing an apron and spectacles, stands behind the bar. In the far corner, GIZZARD, a thirty-year-old black man wearing a brown suit, sweeps underneath the empty tables, SCRATCHING the rugose floorboards with thick bristles.

GIZZARD
Why’s it so quiet?

CLARENCE
They rode out the beeves yesterday--
like I told you yesterday. Nobody
around but wives, kids, and dead
Indians.

The doors to the saloon open and through them strides JOHN BROODER, a strong and uncommonly handsome forty-year-old fellow who has sharp blue eyes, a clean-shaven face, light blonde hair, big fists, a confident gait and a gray suit.

CLARENCE (CONT'D)
Good evening Mister Brooder.

BROODER
Good evening.
(he surveys the dreary establishment)
It's like a church in here, though it lacks even pious women.

CLARENCE
Why don't you patronage the man at the pianoforte and enliven things?

Brooder looks at the ancient Pianist, who is asleep, and approaches him, reading the sign atop his instrument--
'1 song 3¢. 2 songs 6¢. 3 songs 10¢.'

BROODER
Pardon me.

The Pianist does not raise his head from the pillow or open his eyes.

PIANIST
Good evening.

BROODER
If one song costs three cents, why do three cost a dime?

PIANIST
That's the rate.

BROODER
Shouldn't the price per song get cheaper when more are commissioned?

PIANIST
I get tired after two, so the third costs extra.

BROODER
Do four songs cost a dollar?

PIANIST
Buy a song or depart.

Brooder grins, withdraws a dime and drops it into the bucket, where it CLINKS and rolls in three lonely circuits. The Pianist opens his eyes and lifts his head from the pillow.

BROODER
That was a dime.

PIANIST
I know the sound of Lady Liberty.

After interlacing his long fingers, the oldster CRACKS his knuckles, arches his back and turns his sign over, revealing its hidden text-- ‘Starting Fee = 1 Drink.’

PIANIST (CONT'D)
I’d like whisky.

INT. SHERIFF’S OFFICE & JAIL OF BRIGHT HOPE - SAME

SHERIFF FRANKLIN HUNT, a solidly-built fifty-six-year-old fellow with silver hair, brown eyes, a thin mouth, a neat beard, tanned skin, a dark blue suit, a black hat, a brass star, polished boots and a pistol with an ivory handle pulls a WHISTLING kettle from a black iron stove top that is adjecent to the empty jail cells. Into the room walks CHICORY, a tall, gaunt, seventy-one-year-old fellow who has big eyes, wild hair, a bushy beard that begs inhabitants and weathered olive-colored suit.

CHICORY
Good evening sheriff.

SHERIFF HUNT
Chicory.

CHICORY
I was out on a ramble and-
(he SNIFFS the air)
That tea smells gruesome.

SHERIFF HUNT
It’s soup.

CHICORY
Can I have some? I haven’t had a good meal today.
(he ruminates)
Maybe not anything.

SHERIFF HUNT
Sit.

Sheriff Hunt points to a desk, and the oldster sets his bones in a chair beside it. From a wooden shelf, the lawman withdraws a coffee mug, which he places beside its sibling on the counter.

Chicory looks a question at Sheriff Hunt.

SHERIFF HUNT (CONT'D)
I forgot to bring spoons. You think you can drink this without burnin’ your mouth?

CHICORY
I like challenges.

Sheriff Hunt pours soup into the mugs, snuffs the fire and closes the stove door, CLANK. Presently, he carries the steaming meals to the desk, sets them down and takes a seat.

CHICORY (CONT'D)
Smells good now that I know it isn't supposed to be tea.

SHERIFF HUNT
You need to make sure you have a couple meals every day. I can't have my backup deputy pass out 'cause he forgot to eat.

Chicory puffs up with pride and shakes his head.

CHICORY
No sir. That would be shameful.

The oldster sips from the mug and grits his teeth, pained by the searing heat of the soup.

SHERIFF HUNT
Let it cool.

Chicory nods his head, exhales steam and sets the mug upon the table.

SHERIFF HUNT (CONT'D)
You were gonna tell me about your ramble.

CHICORY
That's right! Glad you remembered. I went out for a night ramble-- to get some clean air and set some fresh flowers on Nadine's grave.

Sheriff Hunt blows on his soup, as Chicory, momentarily distracted by old memories, finds the thread of his tale.

CHICORY (CONT'D)
So I decide to go the long way around-- a big circuit like a sereno does on his patrol over in Spain. And when I do, I see this man in the perimeter-- a tall fellow I don't know.

The sworn man swallows soup and looks at the oldster, who drinks from his mug and wrinkles his nose.

CHICORY (CONT'D)
It tastes like corn.

SHERIFF HUNT
It’s corn chowder.

CHICORY
Then things are lining up.

SHERIFF HUNT
Did he do anything? The stranger?

CHICORY
He changed his clothes, put some luggage in a hole, covered it up and went to town.

Sheriff Hunt contemplates the information.

CHICORY (CONT'D)
It is the official opinion of the backup deputy that his manner was suspicious.

SHERIFF HUNT
Where is he?

CHICORY
The Learned Goat.

INT. BEDROOM / O’DWYER HOUSE - SAME

A frosted lantern radiates light throughout the small bedroom, illuminating floral wallpaper, Samantha’s bare back and her dark wavy hair as she straddles Arthur, her lower half concealed by rose-hued sheets. Presently, she presses her palms to her husband’s chest and glances at his hurt leg.

SAMANTHA
How’s your tibia?

ARTHUR
Not thinking about tibias.

Arthur’s hands slide under the linens and onto Samantha’s buttocks, which he clasps. Breath quickening, the woman leans forward, and her dark hair spills onto her husband’s chest and face. The cowboy withdraws his hands from the sheets, cups her breasts and arches his back.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)
Ow!

Samantha jerks upright and looks down at Arthur's face.

SAMANTHA
Did I hurt you?

ARTHUR
Let's do this the right way.

SAMANTHA
Is that a criticism?

ARTHUR
It's instinct.

Arthur pulls Samantha to the mattress, rolls over, positions himself atop her, leans his weight on his arms and winces as he maneuvers his hurt leg. Beads of sweat DRIP from his nose onto his wife's pale neck.

SAMANTHA
Are you sure you're able to-

The cowboy presses into his wife, and her breath catches.

SAMANTHA (CONT'D)
Please continue.

Samantha crosses her legs behind Arthur's buttocks, and together they find a slow, steady pulse. They kiss.

INT. THE LEARNED GOAT SALOON - MOMENTS LATER

The Pianist puts his pillow upon the ivory, sets his head down and shuts his eyes, while Brooder (at the bar) and Gizzard (at a back table) watch Clarence (the bartender) walk to the far end of the establishment. Sitting on the last stool by himself and wearing clean clothing that does not fit his long body is Purvis, leaner, darker and more haggard than he was eleven days ago when he fled from the native burial ground and left his partner to die.

CLARENCE
What's your predilection?

Purvis looks up. His thoughts are in a distant place and his eyes are wild.

CLARENCE (CONT'D)
Looks like you could use something potent. Or omnipotent.

Purvis opens his mouth, closes it and nods his head. Presently, Clarence turns to the liquor shelf and selects a bottle that has a pitchfork on its label, which he uncorks and pours into a tumbler.

The preoccupied brigand stares at the amber fluid, oblivious of the curious gazes that he has garnered from Brooder and Gizzard.

CLARENCE (CONT'D)
My brother made this.
(he sets the tumbler down)
It’s like a tree fell on you. A redwood.

GIZZARD
Petrified.

Purvis reaches a tremulous hand toward the drink, and the saloon doors swing open, startling him. Into the establishment stride and Sheriff Hunt and Chicory.

CLARENCE
Things are slow enough without you two chasing people off.

SHERIFF HUNT
We’ve got business.

CHICORY
Important.

Clarence’s eyes flicker to Purvis, and Sheriff Hunt nods. The proprietor glides away from the stranger, who looks at his trembling tumbler, intensely uncomfortable. Presently, the lawmen arrive at the end of the bar.

SHERIFF HUNT
Good evening.

Purvis looks up, nods his head and lowers his gaze.

SHERIFF HUNT (CONT'D)
You aren’t mute, are you?

PURVIS
No.

SHERIFF HUNT
In civilized towns--places like Bright Hope--you look a man direct in the face when you talk to him.

The brigand looks up at the sworn man.

PURVIS
I didn’t do anything. I’m just sitting here having a drink.

SHERIFF HUNT
I didn’t say you did anything. What’s your name?

Purvis thinks.

PURVIS
Buddy.

SHERIFF HUNT
Took a moment to recall, didn’t it?

PURVIS
My name’s Buddy.

SHERIFF HUNT
Why’re you here?

PURVIS
I’m supposed to meet someone.

SHERIFF HUNT
What’s today’s date?

The brigand is perplexed by the inquiry.

SHERIFF HUNT (CONT'D)
If you had a rendezvous scheduled, it seems like you’d know what day it was.

Purvis cogitates, but does not offer an answer.

SHERIFF HUNT (CONT'D)
Let me give you an easier question-- who’d you steal those clothes from?

Fire shines in the brigand’s eyes.

PURVIS
I didn’t steal anything!

Chicory turns to the other saloon inhabitants and motions for them to leave. Sheriff Hunt rests the meat of his right hand on the ivory handle of his revolver and stares at Purvis.

SHERIFF HUNT
You’re real angry for a guy named Buddy.

Gizzard and the Pianist depart, but Brooder remains, standing by the door and lighting a cigar.

PURVIS
You've been squirting lemon in my eye since you came in. I didn't commit a crime.

SHERIFF HUNT
And why're you talkin' 'bout crime now?

Purvis does not respond. Brooder exhales smoke and grins.

SHERIFF HUNT (CONT'D)
Are you carrying a weapon-- a gun, a knife, a letter opener with a sharp point? Dynamite?

PURVIS
No.

SHERIFF HUNT
Deputy.

Head held high, Chicory approaches Purvis.

SHERIFF HUNT (CONT'D)
(to Purvis)
If you move in a hasty manner, I'll put a bullet in you.

The backup deputy reaches the brigand.

CHICORY
Raise your hands and stand up.

Purvis puts his hands in the air and rises. Chicory pats the fellow down and turns up nothing except a grimy grouch bag, which he gives to Sheriff Hunt.

CHICORY (CONT'D)
This's the only thing.

PURVIS
I told you before, I ain't got no weapons.

SHERIFF HUNT
Because you put 'em in that hole you dug?

Frightened, the brigand lunges for the door. An arc of light glimmers at the sheriff's hip and flashes, BANG.

Blood erupts from Purvis's thigh, and his head SMACKS against the floor, where it bounces and SMACKS a second time. Presently, he looses consciousness.

Sheriff Hunt holsters his gun and looks at Chicory.

SHERIFF HUNT (CONT'D)
Grab an arm.

The lawmen seize the prostrated fellow's wrists, and Brooder, smoking and grinning, opens the outside door. Across the floorboards, Purvis is unceremoniously dragged, acquiring straw, dust, dirt and peanut shells.

SHERIFF HUNT (CONT'D)
Brooder.

BROODER
Sheriff?

SHERIFF HUNT
Roust Doc Taylor.

Brooder nods his head, and the luminous circle at the end of his cigar becomes a bright vertical line.

SHERIFF HUNT (CONT'D)
Put coffee in him if he's liquored.

EXT. OUTER PERIMETER OF BRIGHT HOPE - SAME

Clouds conceal the moon, and the small frontier town melts into the night.

CLARENCE (O.S.)
The entertainment is over. Step back inside and spend some money.

People MURMUR and FOOTFALLS echo. A dry summer wind blows and carries with it the sound of an EERIE WHISTLE.

INT. BEDROOM / O'DWYER HOUSE - LATER

Arthur, wearing loose maroon long johns, lies in bed, his splinted leg propped up on a pillow. Into the dimly lighted room strides Samantha, covered by a blue robe and holding a bowl of steaming water.

SAMANTHA
It should be elevated higher than your heart.

ARTHUR
Is this why you buy so many pillows?

After setting the bowl upon the nightstand, the woman slides a second pillow under the cowboy's hurt leg.

SAMANTHA
I buy pillows because they're pretty.

The woman makes an appraisal, claims a third pillow and inserts it between the others. Arthur's leg is now eighteen inches above the mattress.

ARTHUR
This isn't very comfortable.

SAMANTHA
It isn't supposed to be.

ARTHUR
So it's correct.

With great care, Samantha raises the right cuff of Arthur's long johns, revealing his swollen and purple shin, which is stitched in three places and braced by wooden splints.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)
How's it look?

SAMANTHA
The same.

Samantha lifts the washcloth from the steaming bowl, wrings water from it, folds it in half and sets it upon Arthur's leg. The supine cowboy clenches his fists, but does not make a sound. A moment later, he relaxes and exhales, relieved.

ARTHUR
Once the hellish burnin' stops, it feels almost nice. Thanks.

SAMANTHA
You are very welcome.

ARTHUR
You're takin' real good care of me-- anything I can do for you?

SAMANTHA
Yes.

The woman sits on the bed, tucks her bare legs beneath the blanket and from a pocket in her robe withdraws an envelope, which is addressed, 'To: Mrs. Samantha O'Dwyer.'

SAMANTHA (CONT'D)
Would you read this out loud? It's the poem that you wrote in Wyoming.

ARTHUR
It ain't a poem. Just some things I was thinking and...and some emotions.

SAMANTHA
Would you read it to me?

The cowboy, embarrassed, looks away from his wife.

ARTHUR
It'll sound stupid if I say it out loud.

SAMANTHA
It will not-- it's beautiful. Whenever I felt lonely, I read it and felt better. Please?

Samantha sets the envelope upon Arthur's stomach.

ARTHUR
I can't think of a polite way out of this.

SAMANTHA
That's because th-

Somebody KNOCKS on the front door, surprising the O'Dwyers.

ARTHUR
What time is it?

SAMANTHA
Half past ten.

Again, the visitor KNOCKS. Arthur attempts to rise, but Samantha urges him back down with the palm of her hand.

SAMANTHA (CONT'D)
Stay.
(she stands)
I'll see-

MALE VOICE (O.S.)
Mr. and Mrs. O'Dwyer? It's John Brooder. I'm here regarding a medical matter.

The cowboy relaxes, and his wife claims a black coat from a hook on the wall.

SAMANTHA
(calling out)
I'll arrive presently, Mr. Brooder.

INT. LIVING ROOM / O'DWYER HOUSE - SAME

Samantha, buttoning her outerwear and carrying a lantern, hastens into the living room, past the furniture and to the entrance, where she hangs the light from a nail in the wall, throws the bolt and opens the door. In the weak radiance stands John Brooder, who nods his head respectfully, a gesture at odds with the smirk on his face.

BROODER
Good evening Mrs. O'Dwyer.

SAMANTHA
Are you hurt?

BROODER
I'm not the injured party-- there was a drifter who got quick with the sheriff.

SAMANTHA
Shot in the leg?

BROODER
Shot in the leg.

SAMANTHA
Doc Taylor's in his cups?

BROODER
Deep.
(he raises a medical bag)
I took his equipment.

SAMANTHA
I have my own.

Brooder opens the bag, revealing its cluttered interior.

BROODER
Does yours contain two bottles of vodka?

SAMANTHA
Where's the drifter?

BROODER
In jail.

Samantha nods her head, withdraws from the door, sits on a stool, dons rose socks and reaches for a pair of gray button-up boots.

SAMANTHA
(calling out)
Arthur?

ARTHUR (O.S.)
Yeah?

SAMANTHA
I need to extract a bullet. Mr. Brooder shall escort me.

She slides a boot onto her left foot.

ARTHUR (O.S.)
Okay. John?

BROODER
Yes?

ARTHUR (O.S.)
If you make any flirtatious remarks in my wife's presence, there'll be a reckoning.

Brooder drags on his cigar and exhales a plume of smoke.

BROODER
I'll behave, cowboy.

Samantha claims her medical bag from a shelf.

INT. BEDROOM / O'DWYER HOUSE - SAME

Within the adjacent room, Arthur, abed, hears the sound of FOOTFALLS, followed by that of the front door closing, THUNK. He looks at the window, beyond which two pairs of unseen boots CRACK gravel.

SAMANTHA (O.S.)
Please keep your leg elevated.

ARTHUR
I'll do it. Bye.

SAMANTHA (O.S.)
Bye.

The FOOTFALLS grow dim and disappear.

INT. SHERIFF'S OFFICE & JAIL OF BRIGHT HOPE - LATER

Purvis lies on a cot in a jail cell, unconscious, his wrists bound by manacles, his ankles fettered, a bloody kerchief wrapped around his shot thigh. On the far side of the bars and seated at a large oak desk is Sheriff Hunt, busy inspecting the brigand's exhumed possessions, including the green valise and revolvers, all of which are caked with dirt. At the adjacent table, Chicory plays a game of checkers with NICK, a twenty-four-year-old fellow with a deputy star on his brown vest, a baby face, kind blue eyes and a sheer mustache, who skips a black piece over three red opponents, which he summarily removes from the board.

CHICORY
You have a gift.

NICK
I have four brothers and grew up in cold weather-- all we did was checkers.

The oldster looks at the sheriff.

CHICORY
You ever beat Nick in a checkers match?

SHERIFF HUNT
No. Though we only played twice.

CHICORY
I haven't had a different result in a hundred games.
(he thinks)
Maybe I shouldn't bet on this.

Sheriff Hunt withdraws a long, nearly invisible strand of evidence from the green valise.

CHICORY (CONT'D)
What's that?

SHERIFF HUNT
A blonde hair. Looks like from a woman.

CHICORY
I told you that his manner was suspicious.

Sheriff Hunt sets the hair inside a wax envelope that is labelled 'Evidence,' and Chicory nudges a red checker onto a black square. Somebody KNOCKS on the front door, garnering the attentions of the lawmen.

SHERIFF HUNT
That you Doc?

BROODER (O.S.)
It's John Brooder. I brought Mrs. O'Dwyer.

Sheriff Hunt and Nick rise from their seats, and Chicory walks over to the entrance, slides the bolt and opens the door, revealing Samantha and Brooder. The lawmen incline their heads toward the woman.

CHICORY
Good evening Mrs. O'Dwyer.

NICK
Ma'am.

Brooder escorts Samantha up two steps and into the office.

SHERIFF HUNT
Thanks for comin'.

SAMANTHA
I'm happy to help.

The sheriff looks at the handsome fellow and points outside.

SHERIFF HUNT
You can go.

BROODER
You're welcome.

Brooder withdraws a cigar, lights it and departs. Sheriff Hunt looks at Nick.

SHERIFF HUNT
Fling the gate.

The young man jumps a black checker over two reds, removes them from the board and claims a large key ring, which JINGLES. The sheriff turns his attention to his guest.

SHERIFF HUNT (CONT'D)
What do you need from us?

SAMANTHA
An additional lantern and a pot of boiling water.

CHICORY
I'll get them.

Sheriff Hunt escorts Samantha to the jail, where Nick turns his key, eliciting WHINES and CLANKS from old tumblers. The deputy opens the door for the woman, who enters the cell and walks over to the cot upon which lies the unconscious, manacled and fettered prisoner.

SAMANTHA
Can you remove his chains?

SHERIFF HUNT
No ma'am.

SAMANTHA
He's that dangerous?

Sheriff Hunt, standing beside the cell door, points to the green valise and guns upon his desk.

SHERIFF HUNT
He buried that stuff outside town. It isn't his, and it's got bloodstains.

Samantha leans closer to Purvis, who is shivering and covered with sweat, and sets her right wrist to his forehead.

SAMANTHA
He's boiling.

SHERIFF HUNT
I only shot him in the leg.

NICK
That's his hobby.

SHERIFF HUNT
Deputy.

SAMANTHA
Not every man who leaps in front of your pistol is hale.

Sheriff Hunt looks at the brigand and shrugs.

SHERIFF HUNT
Do what you can for him. Very likely he's gonna get hanged, but it'd be nice if the families of the people he bushwacked could come to town and see him go purple on the rope.

NICK
That should inspire her.

SHERIFF HUNT
Deputy.

Chicory enters the cell and hangs a lantern directly over Purvis. Sheriff Hunt turns around and points at Nick.

SHERIFF HUNT (CONT'D)
Stay here tonight and help Mrs. O'Dwyer with whatever she needs. Lock up everything and escort her back home when she's done.

NICK
Isn't this why we have a backup deputy?

The oldster, adjusting the lantern, nods his head.

CHICORY
I'll take care of things. I don't sleep more than a few hours anyway.

SHERIFF HUNT
Nick stays.
(to Chicory)
I want you to get some rest-- you had a lot of activity today.

CHICORY
Yessir.

SHERIFF HUNT
You did real good.

Chicory puffs up with pride, nods his head and withdraws from the cell. Samantha sets her medical bag on the adjacent cot.

SAMANTHA
Does he have a name?

SHERIFF HUNT
He proffered “Buddy,” but that’s probably somebody he hates or who’s dead.

SAMANTHA
Very well. Please let my husband know not to wait up-- I’ll need to stay and monitor the patient’s fever after the surgery.

SHERIFF HUNT
Yes ma’am.

Sheriff Hunt picks up his hat and opens the front door.

SHERIFF HUNT (CONT'D)
Chicory.

Chicory picks up a book, walks by Nick’s desk and looks at the checkerboard. A grin curves the bottom half of the oldster’s face.

CHICORY
Hey there...I’m doing better than I remembered. Much be-

NICK
You’re looking at my side of the board.

CHICORY
(disappointed)
Oh.
(turns away)
Goodnight.

NICK
‘Night.

Samantha removes the kerchief from Purvis’s leg, revealing a dark deep bullet hole, caked with gore.

CHICORY
Goodnight Mrs. O’Dwyer.

SAMANTHA
Good night.

SHERIFF HUNT
G’night ma’am.

The sheriff and the backup deputy depart. Nick shuts the door behind them and slides the bolt, CLACK.

From her medical bag, Samantha withdraws a white towel, which she lays on the adjacent cot, and a pair of bullet forceps, which she sets upon the cloth. Nick walks over to the stove and pokes an index finger into the water, PLUNK.

NICK
It's heating up.

SAMANTHA
Please don't put your fingers in the water.

NICK
Yes ma'am.

Samantha sets a bright scalpel beside the forceps, and the sight of the instrument makes Nick uncomfortable.

Through the small barred window of the jail cell comes the dim sound of an EERIE WHISTLE. Purvis shudders in his sleep, and the water begins to boil.

INT. BEDROOM / O'DWYER HOUSE - LATER

A lone candle illuminates Arthur, who is in bed with his leg propped up on three pillows, and Sheriff Hunt, who stands in the open doorway with his hat in his hands.

ARTHUR
Thanks for lettin' me know.

SHERIFF HUNT
Thanks for loanin' her out.

ARTHUR
Deputy Nick's gonna bring her back?

SHERIFF HUNT
He will.

ARTHUR
How's your wife doing?

SHERIFF HUNT
Better.
(he nods a few times)
Thought it was pneumonia, but seems like it was just a bad cold.

ARTHUR
Good to hear. Give her my regards.

SHERIFF HUNT
I will. G'night.

ARTHUR
G'night.

The sheriff puts his hat on his head and departs. His FOOTFALLS echo throughout the house until a door closes, THUNK, and boots CRACK gravel.

Arthur looks at the envelope marked, 'To: Samantha O'Dwyer,' picks it up, lifts the flap and withdraws the letter. After unfolding the document, the cowboy peruses the text, his mouth moving as he reads.

He reaches the end, glances at the side of the bed that is usually occupied by his wife, returns his attention to the letter and CLEARS his throat in a stentorian manner, as would an orator before a public recitation.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)
(reading)
"Dear Samantha,
I hope things are going good for you back in Bright Hope and that Doc Taylor is drinking less. I will try to find some nice jewelry for you even though you said not to spend money on that.
I am in Wyoming now. The ride has been long and difficult, and the foreman had to discipline a lot of men and let some go, which made things harder for the rest of us, especially in this cold weather. Two weeks ago, I took charge of the night roundup and organized it better.
Out here sometimes, when I look at the faces of the other cowboys, I know they're miserable all the way through, but since I met you, I don't get that feeling anymore like I used to. You give me this warmth in my direct center that won't turn cold no matter what happens out here. I am tired and have lost some weight, and I don't know if all of this makes clear sense, but to me it does.
(MORE)

ARTHUR (CONT'D)
I saw these hills on the border and the shapes of them reminded me of you when you are next to me in bed on your side, and sometimes I see you in waterfalls and clouds and always you have that real happy look on your face like when I come back from being away and we are about to kiss for the first time in months.

Arthur folds up the letter and places it inside the envelope.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)
Ain’t a poem.

INT. SHERIFF’S OFFICE AND JAIL OF BRIGHT HOPE - LATER

Purvis opens his dilated eyes and looks at Samantha, who withdraws bloody forceps from the wound in his thigh, a flattened bullet clamped by the instrument’s blunt metal tips. Nearby, Nick stares at the ground, fidgeting.

PURVIS
My body feels like cotton.

SAMANTHA
I gave you some tincture of opium.

The drugged brigand shuts his eyes, and the woman drops the bullet in a cup and lays the forceps on the towel.

NICK
Are you done?

SAMANTHA
I have to clean the wound and sew it shut.

Nick nods his head, his eyes focused on the ground, and Samantha picks up a long swab, which she dips into a vial of alcohol. Through the jail cell window come the sounds of distant horses WHICKERING and WHINNYING.

EXT. WALLINGTON STABLE - SAME

Gray moonlight shines upon a four-door stable that has a long overhang, beneath which sit a water trough and several rectilinear bales of hay. Within the edifice, horses WHICKER and WHINNY, anxious. BUFORD, a seventeen-year-old black man wearing a nightshirt and loose overalls and holding a lantern, walks toward the building, YAWNING.

BUFORD
I’m coming ladies. Don’t fret.

After a few more strides, Buford reaches the stable and is confused by what he sees-- the latch is undone and the door is ajar. He looks into the darkness.

BUFORD (CONT'D)
Mr. Wallington? Is that-

A bone tomahawk cleaves his throat, severing his vocal chords. GASPING and unable to scream, Buford drops the lantern and stumbles backward.

A bird skull pierces his left eye and screws deep into his head, twisting on the end of a wooden pole. Gouts of blood spray from his nostrils. Within the stable, horses SHRIEK.

The bird beak pokes out of the back of the young man’s skull and he is yanked by his head into the darkness, where three figures, holding bows and tomahawks, await him. Amongst the CRIES of horses are several EERIE WHISTLES.

INT. BEDROOM / O’DWYER HOUSE - JUST BEFORE DAWN

Azure light colors the room. Arthur, asleep, rolls onto his side and bumps his hurt leg.

ARTHUR
Ow.

He opens his eyes, sees that he is still alone and glances at the window, beyond which glows a dark blue sky. After he CLEARS his throat, he faces the hall door.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)
Samantha? You back yet?

His words echo throughout the house, but receive no response.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)
Sam?

The inquiry resounds and fades. Arthur YAWNS and looks at the window, mildly concerned.

INT. KITCHEN / THE HUNT'S HOUSE - EARLY MORNING

Sheriff Hunt, wearing a brown union suit, walks into the kitchen where his wife, LORNA HUNT, a fifty-two-year-old woman with broad shoulders, sharp eyes, a sharper nose and silver hair, stands before the counter in a robe and an apron, cutting onions.

SHERIFF HUNT
I'll make breakfast. Why don't-

LORNA
I'd like to do it-- I'm feeling better today.

SHERIFF HUNT
You were feelin' better last night.

LORNA
You're a remedy.

Sheriff Hunt kisses his wife and inspects the counter, where he sees onions, cubes of bacon, eggs and a bag of dry flour.

SHERIFF HUNT
Makin' frybread?

LORNA
That's my intention. But where'd you put the spoons?-- they're no place logical.

SHERIFF HUNT
I thought you'd explain that enigma.

Somebody KNOCKS on the front door, and the Hunts look over.

MALE VOICE (O.S.)
Sheriff Hunt?

SHERIFF HUNT
That you Clarence?

CLARENCE
It's me.

SHERIFF HUNT
The door's open.

Hinges CREAK, followed by heavy FOOTFALLS, and soon the rotund barkeep enters the room, wearing a damp shirt, mud-splattered trousers and dirty boots.

SHERIFF HUNT (CONT'D)
Why’re you in my breakfast?

CLARENCE
There’s a situation.
(he glances at Lorna)
Serious.

LORNA
I’ll leave you two.

Lorna hangs her apron and departs from the kitchen.

SHERIFF HUNT
Talk.

CLARENCE
I went to tend to my colt this morning--put a new shoe on his hind leg--and I saw Buford--the stable boy--lying there dead, torn up into pieces.

Sheriff Hunt’s eyes harden.

SHERIFF HUNT
Did it look like an animal got him?

CLARENCE
Can’t tell. I- I didn’t linger. I jogged straight to your office to get a deputy, but nobody was there.

A coldness expands inside the sworn man’s stomach.

SHERIFF HUNT
Nobody? Not even in the jail cell?

CLARENCE
The whole place was empty.

SHERIFF HUNT
Go up the street, fetch Chicory and meet me at the stable.

EXT. WALLINGTON STABLE - DAWN

Sheriff Hunt, wearing his blue suit and hat and a pistol, and Chicory, wearing bedclothes and clutching a shotgun, follow Clarence to the stable door, which is ajar.

SHERIFF HUNT
(to Clarence)
Get some distance.

The barkeep backs away from the door, and the sworn man draws his revolver and points it at the opening.

SHERIFF HUNT (CONT'D)
Listen up! If anyone's in there, identify yourself right now or I'll shoot you dead!

His words echo within the enclosure, but elicit no response. Presently, the lawmen peer inside the stable. The sheriff's face hardens, and the backup deputy shakes his head.

CHICORY
Poor kid.

Sheriff Hunt walks inside, followed by Chicory. Outside the barn, Clarence withdraws a pouch of chewing tobacco, and with trembling fingers, pinches a hirsute lump, which he installs in his left cheek.

SHERIFF HUNT (O.S.)
How many horses does Wallington usually keep in here?

Clarence SPITS in the dirt and wipes juice from his cheek.

CLARENCE
The five he owns and my colt.

From the stable, Sheriff Hunt emerges, cleaning blood from his fingertips with a kerchief, followed by Chicory, who is pale and shaken. They exchange grimaces.

SHERIFF HUNT
Let's check the office.

INT. SHERIFF'S OFFICE AND JAIL OF BRIGHT HOPE - MOMENTS LATER

The front door swings wide and SLAMS into the wall, thrown open by Sheriff Hunt, who stands in the portal with his gun pointing forward. The coldness in the sworn man's belly expands when he sees the overturned desks, broken chairs, bullet holes and bloodstains of the ransacked interior. Presently, he walks forward, surveying the tableau, followed by Chicory, who keeps his shotgun raised. Their FOOTFALLS are loud and resonant.

Sheriff Hunt turns his head and sees something that unsettles him.

Stuck in the back of a chair is an arrow that has a tip made out of a bird skull. He walks over, pulls the shaft loose and inspects it.

CHICORY
Indians?

SHERIFF HUNT
Looks like it.

Chicory's eyes land upon the checker pieces that are strewn across the floor.

CHICORY
Do you think they got Nick?

SHERIFF HUNT
(softly)
Yeah.

Chicory's eyes sparkle, and Sheriff Hunt walks toward the open jail cell. Inside, he sees the empty bed and beside it, Samantha's medical bag.

His stomach sinks.

SHERIFF HUNT (CONT'D)
(quietly)
No.

The oldster looks at the sworn man.

CHICORY
What?

Sheriff Hunt points at the medical bag. Chicory walks over, sees it and looks away, his eyes glimmering.

SHERIFF HUNT
Fetch the Professor and bring him to The Learned Goat. Give him this-

He puts the bird skull arrow in the oldster's hands.

SHERIFF HUNT (CONT'D)
I'll be there in twenty minutes.

CHICORY
Are you going to talk to Mr. O'Dwyer?

SHERIFF HUNT
Yeah.

EXT. O'DWYER HOUSE - MOMENTS LATER

The O'Dwyer house is a small rose building with white trim, a shingled roof and a covered deck that is furnished with a bench and seventeen potted plants. Up the gravel drive walks Sheriff Hunt, boots CRACKING stones, his eyes shaded by the brim of his blue hat.

ARTHUR (O.S.)
Sheriff.

The front door opens. Standing in the portal is Arthur, wearing a loose tan shirt and matching slacks, leaning on a wooden crutch.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)
My wife still at the jail?

Sheriff Hunt continues up the drive, his face grim. Beneath his boots, gravel CRACKS.

SHERIFF HUNT
Let's talk inside.

ARTHUR
Did something happen?

Sheriff Hunt walks onto the porch and points into the house.

SHERIFF HUNT
Let's talk where you can sit.

ARTHUR
Tell me here and tell me plain.

SHERIFF HUNT
Mrs. O'Dwyer was abducted.

Arthur stares at the lawman, stunned. Sheriff Hunt motions toward the living room.

SHERIFF HUNT (CONT'D)
You should-

ARTHUR
Who took her?

SHERIFF HUNT
Looks like Indians. Got Nick too.

The cowboy's shock is replaced by a deep, penetrating horror. Beads of sweat cover his skin.

SHERIFF HUNT (CONT'D)
We're meeting at The Learned Goat to talk about what can be done.

Arthur leans into his crutch, ambles across the porch and continues onto the drive. Sheriff Hunt walks onto the porch, picks up the pair of boots that stand upon the wood, and follows the departing cowboy.

INT. THE LEARNED GOAT - MOMENTS LATER

The saloon is dim, unlighted but by accidental sunlight. Sheriff Hunt draws the door open for Arthur, who enters, his face flush with pain and anger, the bottoms of his crutch THUDDING upon the floorboards. Presently, the sworn man walks over to a card table and pulls out a chair for the cowboy. Gizzard emerges from the back room, wearing a long red night shirt, perplexed by the sight of the visitors.

SHERIFF HUNT
Will you brew some coffee?

GIZZARD
Is something amiss?

Sheriff Hunt sets the boots beside Arthur.

SHERIFF HUNT
Yeah.

Gizzard looks at the cowboy, who sits at the card table, brooding and silent, and returns his gaze to the sworn man.

SHERIFF HUNT (CONT'D)
Put some whisky in his.

GIZZARD
I will.

The black man departs, and Clarence walks into his saloon, followed by a tall, lean, well-dressed fellow of sixty years, MR. WALLINGTON.

MR. WALLINGTON
Sheriff Hunt. What do you intend to do about my horses?

SHERIFF HUNT
They're not my priority right now.

MR. WALLINGTON
Several of my finest-

SHERIFF HUNT
Quiet. Ask about horses again and I'll slap you red.

Mr. Wallington is astonished by the threat, but remains quiet. Clarence withdraws a stool and dusts it with his hand.

CLARENCE
Have a seat, Mr. Wallington. I'll retrieve your special bottle.

The barkeep walks behind the counter, inserts a key into a locked drawer and opens it, revealing a gilded bottle of aged scotch that lies upon a silk pillow. Mr. Wallington sits, and the double doors swing open, admitting Chicory.

CHICORY
I retrieved our expert.

Into the saloon strides THE PROFESSOR, a hawk-nosed thirty-six-year-old Native American with slicked black hair, a tight beige shirt, blue jeans and cowboy boots. Arthur sees the bird skull arrow in his left hand and stares at it, balefully. Sheriff Hunt pats the cowboy's shoulder, walks toward The Professoer and shakes the fellow's right hand.

SHERIFF HUNT
You know who did this?

THE PROFESSOR
There's only one group that hunts with these.

The native waggles the bird skull arrow.

SHERIFF HUNT
Who?

THE PROFESSOR
They don't have a name.

SHERIFF HUNT
What kind of tribe doesn't have a name?

THE PROFESSOR
One that doesn't have a language. Cave dwellers.

SHERIFF HUNT
You know where they are?

THE PROFESSOR
I have a general idea.

Through the double doors strides John Brooder, whose presence is noticed and immediately disregarded by the assemblage.

SHERIFF HUNT
You'll take us to them?

THE PROFESSOR
I won't.

Gizzard sets a steaming cup of coffee beside the cowboy's right elbow, and Brooder finds a stool.

SHERIFF HUNT
'Cause you're an Indian?

THE PROFESSOR
Because I don't want to get killed.

ARTHUR
You're afraid of your own kind?

The native looks over at the cowboy.

THE PROFESSOR
They're not my kind any more than some man in France is your kind, simply because you and he have the same coloring. They're a spoiled bloodline of inbred animals who rape and eat their own mothers.

Silence expands throughout the saloon. Arthur's heart pounds and he finds his voice as he eyes the native.

ARTHUR
These things got a name?

THE PROFESSOR
They're called Troglodytes.

The Professor sets the arrow down, and the bird skull CLACKS against varnished wood.

SHERIFF HUNT
Any reason they tore up the stable boy, but took the others away?

THE PROFESSOR
They don't eat Negroes.

The black custodian scratches his head.

GIZZARD
I don’t know how to feel about that.

CHICORY
Do they think they’re poisonous?

SHERIFF HUNT
Chicory.
(to The Professor)
You’ll show us where they’re at?

THE PROFESSOR
You’ll be killed if you enter their territory. They-

Arthur POUNDS his fist against the table

ARTHUR
That wasn’t the question.

The native regards the cowboy.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)
Show us where they’re at.

SHERIFF HUNT
We won’t be dissuaded.

Resigned, The Professor nods his head.

THE PROFESSOR
Bring me a map of the western range.

Clarence dispatches Gizzard. Sheriff Hunt, Chicory and The Professor gather around Arthur’s table. At the bar, Mr. Wallington drinks scotch, and Brooder, smoking, glances at the swinging doors, beyond which sound FOOTFALLS.

BROODER
The mayor’s here.

People SIGH and GROAN. The saloon doors swing wide, admitting MAYOR PORTER, a short forty-five-year-old man, wearing a pin-striped maroon suit, a black bowler cap and thick glasses, accompanied by MRS. PORTER, a matronly forty-nine-year-old woman with a pine green double-breasted sporting coat, matching leggings, a hard face, a frown and penetrating eyes that fix on Sheriff Hunt.

MRS. PORTER
Why was my husband, the mayor, not informed of this situation immediately?

Chicory interposes himself.

CHICORY
The sheriff told me to get him, but I'm old and forget things.

MRS. PORTER
Do you expect me to believe that?

CHICORY
I'm hoping.

Toward the group, Mrs. Porter leads her small husband.

MRS. PORTER
(to the sheriff)
Was it Indians?

SHERIFF HUNT
Troglodytes.

Gizzard arrives at the card table, where he sets down and unrolls a vellum map.

The Professor studies the western area of the illustration, and the saloon inhabitants study him.

THE PROFESSOR
In this empty area-

The native runs an index finger up and down a blank space on the west side of the map.

THE PROFESSOR (CONT'D)
-is a mountain range that is forbidden territory, and has been for centuries. And somewhere in the northwestern part of it-
(he TAPS the vellum)
-is a place that my people call The Valley of the Starving Men.
(he looks at the sheriff)
The troglodytes are said to live there.

SHERIFF HUNT
All right.

CHICORY
That's days from here.

Mr. Wallington approaches the group and gives a silver cartridge pen to Sheriff Hunt, who nods his appreciation, unscrews the cap and marks the vellum.

SHERIFF HUNT
How many of them do you think there are?

THE PROFESSOR
It won't matter. You've no chance against any number of them.

The cowboy and the sheriff exchange a meaningful glance, and the latter turns to face the crowd.

SHERIFF HUNT
All of you stay here. Be watchful, and if you have to go out at night, travel armed and in a group. I'm riding out with Mr. O'Dwyer, because there isn't a choice for either of us.

MRS. PORTER
You'll be killed.

Arthur dons his cowboy boots. Sheriff Hunt rolls up the vellum, and a hand grasps his shoulder. He turns around and sees Chicory.

CHICORY
I'm coming with you.

SHERIFF HUNT
I need you here-- keepin' an eye on things.

CHICORY
I'm coming. They got Nick and-
(his voice snags)
-and...and this is what a backup is for--helping in an emergency--not staying behind. I'm coming.

Sheriff Hunt looks at Chicory and sees that the seventy-one-year-old is fixed on the matter.

SHERIFF HUNT
(softly)
All right old man.

Mrs. Porter waves her hands as if clearing away a bad smell.

MRS. PORTER
This is suicide.

Arthur rises from the table, leans into his crutch and looks at Sheriff Hunt.

ARTHUR
I'll be packed and in front of the jail in fifteen minutes.

BROODER
As will I.

Every person in the saloon eyes the handsome fellow, who rises from his stool and looks the cowboy in the face.

BROODER (CONT'D)
I'm the one who fetched your wife and got her involved. I have a responsibility to you both.
(he snuffs his cigar on the bottom of his boot)
And I've killed more Indians than everyone here put together.

THE PROFESSOR
That's an ugly boast.

BROODER
It isn't a boast, but a fact.

Brooder eyes the Professor balefully, sees no challenge forthcoming, and turns from the native. Casually, the handsome fellow flings his cigar butt at the native's boots, grins and follows Arthur through the swinging doors. The Professor smolders, but holds his tongue. Nearby, Sheriff Hunt looks at Mrs. Porter.

SHERIFF HUNT
Telegraph Gatesville and let them know what happened. And have them send a couple deputies to watch over things while I'm gone.

MRS. PORTER
You should address the mayor directly.

The little mayor nods his head, indignant.

MAYOR
Yes, you sh-

SHERIFF HUNT
And somebody should bury Buford--
he doesn't have any kin in Bright
Hope.

MR. WALLINGTON
I will have him blessed and put
under.

Sheriff Hunt and Chicory walk through the saloon doors, which swing back and forth behind them.

MAYOR
Does anybody know how to spell
troglodyte?

Mrs. Porter looks down at her husband.

MAYOR (CONT'D)
For the telegram. I don't want to
look foolish.

INT. KITCHEN / THE HUNT'S HOUSE - MOMENTS LATER

Sheriff Hunt wraps a wedge of hard cheese in newspaper while Lorna bundles two loaves of seeded bread.

LORNA
I hope that this doesn't sound
callous...but...do you truly
believe that they're still alive?

SHERIFF HUNT
I'm not gonna speculate on that.

LORNA
There are limits to the
responsibilities of a town sheriff.

Lorna looks at her husband, who gathers together collops of cured beef.

LORNA (CONT'D)
Riding across the territory into-

SHERIFF HUNT
Lorna. I'm going. There isn't an
option.
(he opens a rucksack)
Let's not have words on this.

Lorna places the bundled bread into the open bag. Tears sparkle in her eyes.

LORNA
Franklin.

The sworn man puts his arms around his wife, and she presses her head into the curve of his neck, hugging him fiercely.

LORNA (CONT'D)
Please come back.

Sheriff Hunt kisses Lorna's forehead.

INT. BEDROOM / O'DWYER HOUSE - SAME

Arthur, wearing a brown cowboy hat and jacket with his tan shirt and pants, leans against a bureau, holsters a revolver, dons a cartridge belt that has sixty bullets, slings a rucksack over his right shoulder, places his crutch under his arm and ambles toward the door.

Near the threshold, something occurs to him, and he turns around, hastens across the room, claims the envelope from the nightstand and looks at a framed daguerreotype of Samantha that hangs upon the bedroom wall.

ARTHUR
You'll hear it soon.

EXT. BONE HILL - SAME

Chicory, wearing his new olive suit, removes a crown hat as he walks up a hill that is covered with headstones. Clutched in his left hand are a bunch of yellow wild flowers that have been tied together with a royal blue ribbon. Ascending, he glances at a marker that is engraved with the name 'Gregory Theodore Smith.'

CHICORY
Mornin' Greg.

Chicory pats the stone and continues farther into the cemetery. Presently, he straightens his back, sucks in his lean stomach and draws his legs together.

At the oldster's feet lies a neat plot that is surrounded by smooth stones and decorated with amber saguaros, which are also held together with royal blue ribbon. The marker is inscribed, 'Nadine Meredith Kory (1843 - 1891) Her memory is cherished daily by all who knew her, especially her husband.'

CHICORY (CONT'D)
I brought some wilds for you.

Beside the saguaros, Chicory sets the bundle of wild flowers.

CHICORY (CONT'D)
Some good people are in trouble, and I've got to do what I can for them.
(he lets his words sink into the ground)
I'll see you here or way up high.

The oldster turns from the marker and walks down the hill.

EXT. SHERIFF'S OFFICE AND JAIL OF BRIGHT HOPE - MOMENTS LATER

At the edge of town sits a squat stone-and-wood building, which is adorned with a sign that reads, 'Sheriff Office & Jail of Bright Hope.' A white Oriental mare canters in front of the structure, bearing John Brooder, who wears charcoal gray clothing, a black gambler hat and a matching bolo tie. With easy precision, the handsome fellow slots long bullets into a cylindrical magazine.

BROODER
Saucy. Hold.

The long-limbed beast halts beside a brown Arabian horse that is tied to a post, and a moment later, Sheriff Hunt emerges from the office, carrying Samantha's medical bag.

ARTHUR (O.S.)
That's my wife's kit?

Sheriff Hunt and Brooder look up the avenue and see Arthur, astride a healthy chestnut stallion.

SHERIFF HUNT
It is.

ARTHUR
I'll carry it.

The cowboy rides up to the lawman, leans over and reaches his hand toward the medical bag. Fire surges up his injured leg, and he pauses, clenching his jaw. Once the pain passes, he claims the kit from the sheriff and rights himself.

SHERIFF HUNT
If we don't find Wallington's stock, can your stallion carry both you and Mrs. O'Dwyer?

ARTHUR
I'm carrying her.

SHERIFF HUNT
Good. Nick can ride with me if he has to-- this animal's strong.

Sheriff Hunt pats the withers of his brown Arabian, unties its reigns, puts his right boot in a stirrup and heaves himself into the saddle.

SHERIFF HUNT (CONT'D)
Mr. O'Dwyer.

The cowboy looks over at the sworn man.

SHERIFF HUNT (CONT'D)
I need to say this, and I don't want you to get sore. We're gonna make a five day journey in three days--ridin' long and sleepin' the bare minimum--but we need to take care of these animals and ourselves.

ARTHUR
I ain't thinkin' 'bout myself right now.

SHERIFF HUNT
I know that, which is why I'm sayin' this now. We don't have any idea what our chances are, but if our horses die before we get there, or we go into hostile territory weak and foggy with exhaustion, we won't rescue anybody.

Arthur considers Sheriff Hunt's words.

SHERIFF HUNT (CONT'D)
The only advantage we've got over these troglodytes is bein' smarter. Let's not lose that.

ARTHUR
It ain't gonna be easy makin' camp while those savages...

The cowboy smolders and looks at the ground.

SHERIFF HUNT
I know it won't. But we need to keep ourselves collected.

ARTHUR
It...it ain't gonna be easy.

CHICORY (O.S.)
I got the dynamite.

The three mounted men look at the oldster, who sits on a cracked saddle that is fastened to the back of a mottled gray, brown, black, beige and white mustang that has bony haunches, bad teeth and a lumpy gait.

SHERIFF HUNT
How many?

CHICORY
Six.

BROODER
That is not a handsome horse.

CHICORY
But he knows how to bite.

Arthur O'Dwyer turns west, and with his heels coaxes his chestnut stallion into action. The beast canters forward, raising dust.

BROODER
Saucy. Hasten.

The white Oriental carries Brooder after the cowboy, flanked by the mounted lawmen.

EXT. OUTER PERIMETER OF BRIGHT HOPE - SAME

A wake of dust rises behind the four riders as they traverse the sparse, flat perimeter of Bright Hope. A couple of concerned residents peer out from behind the windows of the outermost edifices.

CLARENCE (O.S.)
Good luck and come back!

GIZZARD (O.S.)
Alive!

After the crew passes the town sign, Sheriff Hunt and Chicory glance toward the hole from which they unearthed the brigand's possessions.

John Brooder slots a loaded magazine into his repeater rifle and slides the ready weapon into the sheath that is tied to the front of his horse.

Arthur, pained by the jarring impact of his stallion's quick canter, stares forward, his mind filled with dark thoughts.

EXT. POND SURROUNDED BY ROCKS AND BRAMBLES - LATER

Brooder drops off of his white Oriental, and it follows him across round rocks to the pond where Chicory and Sheriff Hunt water their animals. Arthur, perspiring and red, grips his saddle horn, inhales deeply and leans to the side.

ARTHUR
Ow! Damn.

BROODER
Let me help you down.

The handsome fellow approaches the cowboy.

ARTHUR
I can do this.

BROODER
Not gracefully.

SHERIFF HUNT
Pain is how your body talks to you,
Mr. O'Dwyer. Listen to it.

Brooder walks beside the stallion and puts his hands out. Embarrassed, Arthur clambers from the saddle, leans his weight upon the handsome fellow's shoulders, places his good foot on the ground and reclaims his crutch.

Chicory raises the front right leg of his animal, plucks a stone from its hoof and skips it across the pond. Nearby, Sheriff Hunt plunges his hands through his own reflection, brings cupped water to his mouth and drinks.

SHERIFF HUNT (CONT'D)
Mr. O'Dwyer.

ARTHUR
Yeah?

SHERIFF HUNT
We gonna pass by any more ponds
before dark?

Arthur, ambling with his crutch, reaches a flat mossy rock and sits, wincing.

ARTHUR
I don't know what's west of here.
No cattle trail goes that far out.

The sheriff SPLASHES water on his dusty face, rubs grit from the corners of his eyes and looks at the backup deputy.

SHERIFF HUNT
We'll fill up here.

The lawmen rise and detach flaccid water skins and empty canteens from the backs of their animals. Brooder brings Arthur's chestnut stallion to the water, where it dips its head and nuzzles its reflected image.

EXT. HILLY REGION - EARLY SUNSET

The four horses, lathered and dusty, carry their riders up a dry hill, where twilight turns the eyes of animal and man into golden ingot. Arthur, hunched forward on his cantering stallion, grips the horn of his saddle, silently enduring his pain. Nearby, Sheriff Hunt raises his right hand.

SHERIFF HUNT
Hold.

ARTHUR
Whoa.

The cowboy halts his animal directly beside the sworn man.

BROODER
Saucy. Hold.

The long-limbed white Oriental swings in a small half circle and stops. Nearby, the oldster tugs his reins.

CHICORY
Whoa, Peter. Whoa.

Peter continues forward, carrying Chicory away from his peers. Presently, the oldster withdraws a hand from his jacket and holds a palm filled with sugar cubes beside the animal's right eye.

CHICORY (CONT'D)
Sweets?

Peter dances a few more strides and stops. Upon his brown Arabian, Sheriff Hunt SNORTS.

SHERIFF HUNT
In two decades you think Peter would've learned "whoa."

Brooder lights a cigar. Chicory guides his ugly horse back to the group.

CHICORY
He likes to negotiate.
(to the horse)
Here's your stipend.

The ugly horse's lips claim sugar cubes from the oldster's palm, which it chews once and swallows. Sheriff Hunt looks at Brooder and Arthur.

SHERIFF HUNT
We need to a place to rest our burdens.

ARTHUR
There's still light.

SHERIFF HUNT
Not much.

Arthur, unhappy, glances at the setting sun and SPITS in the dirt, brooding.

SHERIFF HUNT (CONT'D)
We'll leave long before sunrise, but now's the time to put in.

The cowboy does not dispute or reply to the remark. Chicory withdraws a spyglass from his bag, extends it and puts it to his right eye.

CHICORY
What exactly is the backup deputy looking for?

SHERIFF HUNT
A sunken area is good. Some green for the horses and some water's better.

BROODER
I'll employ the German.

Brooder withdraws a fine ivory-and-gold spyglass, extends it, locks its pieces into place and puts it to his left eye. After a brief survey, he points southwest.

BROODER (CONT'D)
I see a sunken region with some vegetation, though I cannot tell if it has water.

Chicory glances at Brooder's telescope and points his own in the same direction.

CHICORY
I don’t descry it.

BROODER
It’s there.
(he lowers his spyglass)
Are you disputing the veracity of my claim?

Something dark lurks underneath Brooder’s easy grin.

SHERIFF HUNT
Nobody’s disputing you. Let’s ride to your site.

The handsome man collapses his German spyglass, CLACK-CLACK-CLACK, replaces it in his gear and redirects the nose of his white Oriental.

BROODER
Saucy. Hasten.

The beast’s long limbs flicker, and nearby, the cowboy coaxes his chestnut stallion forward. Presently, the sheriff looks at the backup deputy.

SHERIFF HUNT
Mind your words to Brooder. He’s glossy on the surface, but filled with teeth.

CHICORY
We need to collaborate.

SHERIFF HUNT
Deputy.

CHICORY
Yes sheriff.

Sheriff Hunt speeds his brown Arabian forward and is trailed by Chicory. Ahead of them, the scalp of the setting sun lingers on the flat horizon.

EXT. SUNKEN AREA WITH BUSHES - LATE DUSK

The darkening sky is an azure vault in which a few weak stars shine. Within a sparsely-vegetated sinkhole, Chicory carries dried twigs and sticks over to Arthur, who sits beside a small pit, arranging stones for a fire, while Sheriff Hunt sets down three bedrolls and retrieves the rucksack that he and his wife filled earlier that morning.

Nearby, the hobbled horses chew bushes and drink from puddles, excepting the white Oriental, which stands still while Brooder removes two dense suitcases from its withers.

Chicory sets his burden down, sits on a rock and withdraws a pocket knife. Beside him, Arthur finishes arranging the stones for the fire pit and unsheathes a long hunting blade. Both men claim sticks and SCRAPE chips for kindling.

Brooder carries his luggage over to his bedroll, which is set apart, puts it down, withdraws a key from his left pocket, unlocks the smaller suitcase and reaches inside. Something metallic RINGS.

Arthur and Chicory look up from their chores, as does Sheriff Hunt. All that is visible to them is Brooder's broad back. Again, something metallic RINGS.

The handsome fellow closes his suitcase and rises. Held in his hands is a heavy wooden box, the contents of which RING as he walks past the seated men. Presently, Brooder reaches the far side of the sinkhole, sets the container down, opens its lid and withdraws a large coil of string, attached to which are hundreds of bells, small, round and RINGING.

CHICORY
I just remembered that I forgot to pack the Yule tree.

Brooder lays the line of bells in the dirt and begins a wide circuit of the camp.

BROODER
Are any of you somnambulists?

CHICORY
(indignant)
That's private.

SHERIFF HUNT
Means sleepwalk.

CHICORY
Oh. No, I don't.

SHERIFF HUNT
Me neither.

ARTHUR
No.

BROODER
Good. Sleep with your guns nearby and shoot anything that rings a bell.

Arthur, whittling wood, shakes his head.

ARTHUR
Could be a innocent animal or somebody lost.

BROODER
Our horses are hobbled. Any animal that comes at us is a predator, and any person that approaches a camp in the dark without identifying himself is a criminal or a savage.

Brooder continues to circumscribe the sinkhole with the line of bells.

BROODER (CONT'D)
If you hear a jingle, point your gun and shoot. I will probably beat you to the draw, but don't count on me to save you.

Chicory bristles.

SHERIFF HUNT
(to the oldster)
Let it go.

CHICORY
I can't.
(to Brooder)
Watch how you speak to the law-- the sheriff especially. You aren't the captain.

BROODER
No...but I'm the most intelligent man here, and I intend to keep us alive.

CHICORY
You're the most intelligent, huh? Is that a fact?

BROODER
It is.
(he fetches a new line)
(MORE)

BROODER (CONT'D)
Sheriff Hunt has a wife, and so does Mr. O'Dwyer. And you're a widower.

CHICORY
What does that have to do with anything?

BROODER
Smart men don't get married.

A smile cracks the oldster's face, and the tension is dispelled. Bells JINGLE as the handsome man, smirking, continues his task.

CHICORY
That's because no woman would want you.

BROODER
Many women invite me over for dessert. Eleven in Bright Hope.

ARTHUR
John. I don't want to hear that kind of talk.

BROODER
All right, cowboy.

Arthur withdraws a box of lucifers and SCRATCHES a match. The phosphorous head flares white, turns orange and spreads across the pile of tinder.

EXT. SUNKEN AREA WITH BUSHES - LATER

Flames CRACKLE. Using a thick rag, Sheriff Hunt slides a covered iron pot from the blaze onto cool ground and lifts the lid. A welter of steam rises and disappears the moment that it transcends the reach of the firelight. Chicory plunges a spoon into the stew and scoops a hearty portion onto a tin dish, which he hands to Arthur.

ARTHUR
Thanks.

The oldster twice repeats the process, giving full plates to Sheriff Hunt and Brooder, and then SCRAPES together a smaller helping for himself.

SHERIFF HUNT
You got enough?

CHICORY
Plenty.

SHERIFF HUNT
Blow on it first.

Brooder withdraws a linen bundle, which he unwraps, revealing a fine set of silver utensils. Arthur places a bent fork on his plate and crosses himself.

ARTHUR
Let us pray.

Chicory puts his crown hat on and removes it, his face solemnly transformed; Sheriff Hunt tilts his head forward; Brooder waits.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)
Bless us, O Lord, and these, thy gifts, which-

Arthur's voice catches.

The other men look at the cowboy, who clears his throat and presses on.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)
-which...we are about to receive, from...from...

Arthur's eyes sparkle, and he tilts his head down, unable to continue the ritual, hiding his face from the other men.

Sheriff Hunt, Chicory and Brooder look away.

The cowboy crosses himself, raises a trembling fork to his mouth and eats the steaming provender. Presently, the other men partake.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)
When do we leave?

CHICORY
I'll rouse everyone when I get up.
(he blows on his stew)
I never sleep more than four hours.

The cowboy nods his head and shovels food into his mouth, its blistering heat a welcome distraction.

EXT. SUNKEN AREA WITH BUSHES - LATER

Arthur lies on his bedroll and gently sets his injured leg atop a soft bundle of clothing. Across the fire, Sheriff Hunt and Chicory slide into their pouches and attempt to get comfortable. After some vacillations, the oldster glances over at Brooder, who lies in his plush bedroll near the edge of the sinkhole, reading a novel entitled, 'The Secret Pleasures of the Orient,' by the light of a candle.

CHICORY
Sheriff?

Sheriff Hunt adjusts his pillow (which is a jacket stuffed inside of a sweater) and looks at Chicory.

SHERIFF HUNT
Yeah?

CHICORY
Can you read a book in the bath?

SHERIFF HUNT
I don't understand what you're askin'.

CHICORY
I'm asking if you're able to sit in a bathtub full of hot water and read a book.

SHERIFF HUNT
I've never tried.

CHICORY
I hear about people doing it all the time, but each time I try, I ruin the book. I splash some water on it or I get it wet turning the pages.
(he frowns)
I've dropped some in.

SHERIFF HUNT
Why're you so determined to read literature while takin' a bath?

CHICORY
I never feel better than when I'm sitting in that tub, but it gets dull just looking at your toes the whole time.

SHERIFF HUNT
Why don’t you get a music stand?-- like the kind an orchestra fellow uses or the choirmaster?

CHICORY
That’s an idea.

Sheriff Hunt YAWNS and reaches for a bucket of sand.

SHERIFF HUNT
Put your book on that. Right next to the tub.

Chicory YAWNS and nods his head.

SHERIFF HUNT (CONT'D)
And keep a towel near-- so you can dry your fingers before you turn the pages.

CHICORY
First thing I’ll do when we get back is buy one of those stands.

Sheriff Hunt pours the sand onto the fire, smothering the blaze. Darkness expands throughout the camp.

CHICORY (CONT'D)
I don’t think Mr. Brooder would’ve thought of that solution.

SHERIFF HUNT
G’night old man.

CHICORY
Goodnight.

Nearby, Brooder reads his lurid book by candlelight, and Arthur, lying on his back, stares up at the stars, his mind filled with terrible images.

Bells JINGLE.

Brooder draws his revolver and fires, BANG, BANG, BANG, thrice illuminating the camp. From the darkness beyond the sinkhole comes an animal YELP, followed by a plaintive HOWL. The handsome man returns his attention to his book and flips the page with a smoking barrel.

Chicory looks from Brooder back to Sheriff Hunt and nods in approbation.

CHICORY (CONT'D)
Impressive. Though I hope that wasn't a lady coyote.

A dim, WET WHIMPER sounds in the darkness. Arthur looks in the direction of the injured animal, but sees only darkness. Presently, his eyelids grow heavy...

EXT. OPEN PLAINS - NOON

The horses carry their riders across open plains, trailing a wake of ochre dust. Arthur, leaning forward in his saddle, head low, contends with the sickening pain in his leg. His eyes flicker to his wife's medical bag, which is tied to his horse's withers, and he ruminates.

EXT. ROCKY RIVERBED - LATE AFTERNOON

The animals drink from the river, swishing their tails, while Sheriff Hunt, Chicory and Brooder stand in the shade of several thin trees, stretching their arms and backs, CRACKING and GRUNTING. Arthur, employing his crutch, ambles north, away from the group.

The handsome fellow drinks water and wipes his mouth, and the sworn man fills a canteen. The oldster, watching the cowboy, scratches his beard, ruminating.

CHICORY
It is the official opinion of the backup deputy that Mr. O'Dwyer's manner is suspicious.

SHERIFF HUNT
He's got a lot on his mind.

The lawmen watch the cowboy ascend a small rise, descend the far side and enter the copse. Chicory looks at Brooder.

CHICORY
May if I borrow the German?

BROODER
If you broke it, would you go to Hamburg and purchase a replacement?

CHICORY
Of course I would.
(he points at his horse)
Peter loves schnitzel.

The ugly animal raises its head, hopeful.

BROODER
I'll look myself.

Brooder extends his ivory-and-gold spyglass and raises it to his eye. For a moment, he watches the copse.

CHICORY
See anything?

BROODER
A snake. In a tree.

The lawmen grow concerned.

SHERIFF HUNT
What kind?

A GUNSHOT resounds from the copse. The handsome man tilts his spyglass toward the ground.

BROODER
Deceased.

EXT. COPSE BY THE RIVER - SAME

Arthur, propped against a tree trunk, holsters his smoking revolver, reclaims his crutch and ambles south, wending through vegetation until he reaches a grassy lump and sits. Wincing, he pulls off his right boot and raises the pant leg, revealing his hurt shin, which is swollen and dark red.

ARTHUR
Jesus goddamn.
(he looks up)
Sorry.

Arthur lays a white kerchief over his injury as if it were a corpse, produces a flask and pours a small amount of bourbon onto the shroud. Pain climbs up his right side, and he POUNDS the dirt with his left fist.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)
Damn damn damn.

The intensity of the pain abates, and the cowboy seals the container and puts it in his coat where it CLINKS against another vessel. Presently, he withdraws a small stoppered bottle, the label of which has a picture of a poppy flower and the words, 'Tincture of Opium."

Arthur stares at the drug, ruminating.

EXT. ROCKY RIVERBED - SAME

Brooder lowers his spyglass, collapses it, CLACK-CLACK-CLACK, and slides it into his coat. Nearby, Sheriff Hunt and Chicory hang filled waterskins and canteens upon the horses, all of which are drinking from the river.

From the copse ambles Arthur, employing his crutch, head turned down. The sheriff looks away from the cowboy and addresses the oldster.

SHERIFF HUNT
You know when?

CHICORY
Yessir.

SHERIFF HUNT
Brooder. Don't step in the middle.

BROODER
I shan't.

Arthur nears the group, his mind elsewhere.

SHERIFF HUNT
How's the leg?

ARTHUR
Swollen.

SHERIFF HUNT
Any signs of infection?

ARTHUR
I don't think so.

SHERIFF HUNT
Chicory should look at it tonight when we're camped. He did some surgery in the war.

The cowboy continues toward his chestnut stallion.

ARTHUR
I'll mind it myself.

SHERIFF HUNT
With that tincture of opium?

Arthur stops and faces Sheriff Hunt.

ARTHUR
You went in my things? My wife's possessions?

SHERIFF HUNT
I did.

Indignation burns within the cowboy.

ARTHUR
You shouldn't've.

Chicory yanks Arthur's gun from his holster and steps back. The cowboy whirls, furious.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)
Give that back you dumb imbecile!

The oldster withdraws to a safe distance, and the sworn man interposes himself.

SHERIFF HUNT
Don't hurl insults at Chicory-- he's followin' orders.
(he holds out his hand)
Give over that bottle.

ARTHUR
It ain't yours to claim.

SHERIFF HUNT
If you use that stuff, you'll spill from the saddle. I'm tryin' to prevent that accident.

For a quiet moment, the lawmen watch the cowboy ruminate.

ARTHUR
I ain't had any.

SHERIFF HUNT
I apologize for goin' in your wife's things. Will you yield it?

Arthur withdraws the bottle, hands it to Sheriff Hunt and continues toward his horse. Chicory glances at his superior, who nods, and returns the purloined revolver to the cowboy.

SHERIFF HUNT (CONT'D)
Mr. O'Dwyer rides vanguard.

Brooder walks beside Arthur and helps him onto his stallion. Atop the animal, the cowboy settles.

ARTHUR
Mr. Kory.

CHICORY
You can call me Chicory.

ARTHUR
Chicory. I'm sorry for hollerin' at you.

Chicory walks toward his ugly horse.

CHICORY
My wife called me a dumb imbecile all the time.
(he smiles)
Felt sort of nice.

EXT. FLAT REGION - TWILIGHT

The sun sinks from the sky into the featureless brown swath that is the western terrain. At the vanguard of the outfit, Arthur, clutching his saddle horn, speeds his chestnut stallion, followed by Sheriff Hunt, Chicory and Brooder. Overhead, two birds wheel and KEEN.

SHERIFF HUNT
Brooder.

The handsome fellow looks over at the sworn man.

SHERIFF HUNT (CONT'D)
Take a look with your German. We need to put in soon.

BROODER
I'll make a survey.

CHICORY
Sheriff?

SHERIFF HUNT
Old man?

CHICORY
I know that the world's supposed to be round, but I'm not so sure about this part.

The sheriff surveys the flat environs and nods.

EXT. OPEN PLAINS - NIGHT

The horses doze, hobbled beside a small weedy slope. Nearby, a sunken campfire CRACKLES, radiating light upon Sheriff Hunt, Chicory and Brooder, all of whom have their faces tilted toward steaming plates of pork and beans, and Arthur, who lies asleep on his bedroll, his bad leg raised and uncovered, exposed to the night air.

A twig POPS in the pit, and the hungry riders chew. After a sip of water, the sheriff glances at the cowboy, eats another forkful, swallows and looks at the oldster.

SHERIFF HUNT
Think he's gonna lose the leg?

CHICORY
It could go either way.

Brooder chews his food, swallows and looks at Chicory.

BROODER
Have you ever performed an amputation?

CHICORY
Yeah.
(he chews)
In the war.
(he swallows)
Even done correctly, the chances aren't good.

BROODER
That seems like an especially miserable way to spend your final days.

Unpleasant memories return to the oldster.

CHICORY
The worst.

Something CRACKS in the darkness. Sheriff Hunt dumps sand on the fire and draws his revolver; Brooder points his pistol; Chicory raises his shotgun.

MAN WITH A MEXICAN ACCENT (O.S.)
Relax gentleman, relax. Don't be scared.

Weapons forward, the lawmen and the handsome fellow look at the dark human shape that blots out low stars thirty yards from the camp.

MAN WITH A MEXICAN ACCENT (CONT'D)
I am a friend.

SHERIFF HUNT
You aren't. You're a stranger and a sneak.

MAN WITH A MEXICAN ACCENT
I was about to announce myself.

SHERIFF HUNT
Strike a match so we can see you clear or we'll light things up with our guns.
(to Chicory)
Mind our backs.

Chicory turns in the opposite direction, shotgun raised.

MAN WITH A MEXICAN ACCENT
One moment, por favor.

In the darkness, the visitor fidgets and lifts his hand from his trousers. Presently, a spark SCRATCHES across the night and turns into a small flame--a lighted match--that illuminates the plump face, thin mustache, big hands and bigger stomach of a squat forty-year old Mexican fellow.

MAN WITH A MEXICAN ACCENT (CONT'D)
My name's Ramiro.

SHERIFF HUNT
You got any compañeros?

RAMIRO
I have an associate.

SHERIFF HUNT
Tell him to strike a match.

Ramiro turns his head.

RAMIRO
Do what they ask.

Fifteen yards behind Ramiro, a SCRATCHED match flashes, shining in the foggy spectacles of a TALL MEXICAN with long hair, a tattered suit and a pockmarked face.

SHERIFF HUNT
Just him?

RAMIRO
Just him.

SHERIFF HUNT
If we see any others lurkin' around, we'll execute you.

RAMIRO
I speak the truth. I was going announce myself when-

SHERIFF HUNT
Be quiet and toss your guns.

Ramiro withdraws an old five-shot revolver from underneath his jacket and drops it to the ground.

RAMIRO
My associate is unarmed.

SHERIFF HUNT
Come towards us. Don't drop your matches.

Ramiro and the Tall Mexican walk forward, their faces illuminated from below by the small flames that they carry. Sheriff Hunt taps Chicory's shoulder.

SHERIFF HUNT (CONT'D)
See if you can salvage the fire.

The oldster scoops sand out of the pit, unearthing a bed of coals that bathe the campsite in scarlet light.

Presently, Ramiro RINGS the perimeter bells, and Brooder fires his gun, BANG, BANG. The stunned Mexican stumbles back, GROANING and GURGLING, blood spraying from his chest. His tall associate reaches into his jacket, and the handsome fellow redirects and fires his pistol, BANG, BANG. Spectacles SHATTER, and eyes turn black.

Matches fall to the ground, followed by the two dead visitors. Sheriff Hunt, furious, faces Brooder.

SHERIFF HUNT (CONT'D)
Damn you!

The handsome fellow looks at the sworn man's weapon, which is out, though pointed in a different direction.

BROODER
Holster your gun.

Sheriff Hunt's baleful eyes do not leave Brooder. Nearby, Chicory reaches for his shotgun.

SHERIFF HUNT
Deputy. Hold.

The oldster pauses his clandestine activity, and the sheriff reins in his anger and stabs his gun into his holster. Opposite him, the handsome fellow lowers his revolver.

SHERIFF HUNT (CONT'D)
You had no cause.

BROODER
Those men were thieves or scouts for a raiding party.

SHERIFF HUNT
You don’t know that. And I wanted to get information from them in any case.

BROODER
They wouldn’t tell you the correct year, much less anything else.

SHERIFF HUNT
I know how to interrogate people.

CHICORY
He’s got a system.

BROODER
We need to pack up and make a cold camp somewhere else-- some place defensible. If you want to question my morals, do it later.

SHERIFF HUNT
There aren’t any to question.

Arthur, awake and confused, watches Brooder and Sheriff Hunt walk away from each other.

ARTHUR
What transpired?

CHICORY
Mr. Brooder educated two Mexicans on the meaning of manifest destiny.

Arthur is unsettled by the news.

ARTHUR
Did they deserve it?

CHICORY
I...I don’t know.

Chicory, uncomfortable, glances at the bodies, which are still and bloody, illuminated scarlet by the hearth coals. Nearby, Sheriff Hunt bundles his bedroll, and further off, amongst the horses, Brooder ties heavy luggage to the withers of his white Oriental.

ARTHUR
Are we breakin’ camp?

The oldster returns his attention to the cowboy.

CHICORY
Go back to sleep-- I’ll wake you when it’s time. Or eat dinner-- we put some aside-
(he points at a covered dish)
Pork and beans.

ARTHUR
Thanks.

The cowboy claims the tin plate, and the oldster walks over to the dead men, who are facedown, and rolls the taller one onto his back. Clutched in the fellow’s hand is a pocket knife, and dangling from his collar is beaded necklace with an ivory crucifix.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)
Was he armed?

CHICORY
Sort of.

Arthur eats a forkful of pork and beans, and Chicory walks toward his bedroll.

ARTHUR
What time is it?

CHICORY
About nine, though it feels like next week.

EXT. FLAT PLAINS - LATER

The moon turns the flat terrain into a lunar slate across which the four weary horses carry their riders. Atop the white Oriental, Brooder surveys the northern, southern and western horizons with his German spyglass.

BROODER
I see some rocks.

Sheriff Hunt YAWNS and rubs his eyes.

SHERIFF HUNT
Good enough.

EXT. ROCKY REGION IN THE PLAINS - LATER

The horses are hobbled beside a ring of yard high stones within which Arthur, Sheriff Hunt, Chicory and Brooder fix their bedrolls and lie down, settling for their brief respite. The oldster fidgets and looks at the handsome man.

CHICORY
You shouldn't've shot those Mexicans.

Brooder places his hat over his face, shielding his eyes from the moonlight.

CHICORY (CONT'D)
You hear me Brooder? It was wrong.

BROODER
Go to sleep old timer.

CHICORY
One of them was wearing a crucifix.

BROODER
Then Jesus should've helped him.

Arthur looks over.

ARTHUR
You shouldn't call for the Lord's attention right now.

BROODER
I'm not overly concerned.

SHERIFF HUNT
Quiet. We need to sleep every minute we can. This situation's bad enough already.

CHICORY
It was wrong of him-

SHERIFF HUNT
Deputy.

Chastened, Chicory shuts his mouth. Silence spreads throughout the camp, and soon, eyelids grow heavy.

EXT. ROCKY REGION - LATER

The stars are gone and the moon is almost dead. Somebody GRUNTS. Arthur opens his eyes and sees Brooder, a towel stuffed in his mouth and a knife stuck in his shoulder, wrestling with a MEXICAN MAN.

The cowboy draws and fires, BANG. The assailant GRUNTS and SLAMS against a rock. Startled awake, Sheriff Hunt and Chicory pull guns.

ARTHUR
Ambush!

Arthur shoots the Mexican Man again, BANG. Brooder draws his revolver, SPITS the rag from his mouth, aims into the darkness and squeezes his trigger, BANG, BANG, BANG. By the light of the gunfire, the crew sees three distant MEN, retreating east, as well as the empty area beside the camp.

CHICORY
They took our horses!

SHERIFF HUNT
Blast!

ARTHUR
No.

Brooder and Sheriff Hunt rise, guns pointing at the opaque eastern horizon. Nearby, Chicory helps Arthur to his feet.

The dim sound of LAUGHTER echoes across the landscape. All four men point their guns toward the derisive cachinnation, but they cannot see anything or anyone to fire upon.

SHERIFF HUNT
Don’t waste your bullets. They’re beyond.

BROODER
I don’t understand how they got them all-- Saucy never would’ve allowed some greaser on her back.

CHICORY
You trained her in bigotry?

BROODER
She’s smart and she’s loyal.

The cowboy surveys the western landscape and sees a white lump that is forty yards off, lying still upon the ground, stained with dark fluid.

ARTHUR
John.

Brooder looks at Arthur, who motions toward the prone creature. The handsome fellow sees it, hardens, pulls the knife out of his shoulder and throws it at the dead man; the point skewers his bladder and the ground below him darkens with cold urine.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)
Looks like she resisted.

BROODER
Blasted greasers.

SHERIFF HUNT
Brooder. How bad's that shoulder?

Ignoring the inquiry, Brooder walks across the plain toward the inert creature. The area is quiet but for his FOOTFALLS, and a strained WHINNY that issues from the lump.

BROODER
I'm coming.

Brooder nears the dying animal, draws his revolver and thumbs the hammer, CLICK. Again, the dying beast WHINNIES.

The handsome fellow kneels beside his horse, and runs his hand along its blood-spattered coat.

BROODER (CONT'D)
Thank you for your services.

A GUNSHOT lights up the plain, resounding on every horizon.

The sound fades.

Brooder rises and holsters his revolver, his eyes glimmering with starlight.

BROODER (CONT'D)
(quietly)
Bye.

Arthur ambles over to the lawmen.

ARTHUR
We need to compact our gear, bury the remainder and go.
(MORE)

ARTHUR (CONT'D)
If we sleep, it should be in hot daylight, not now.

Chicory looks at Sheriff Hunt, awaiting a verdict.

SHERIFF HUNT
That valley is a two day walk from here.

ARTHUR
I'll try to match your pace. If I fall behind, I'll catch up whenever you sleep.

The sworn man has obvious misgivings about the cowboy's plan, but knows that there is no better alternative.

SHERIFF HUNT
All right.

Brooder returns to the camp and walks toward his gear.

SHERIFF HUNT (CONT'D)
Brooder. Compact your gear to the essentials.

BROODER
(quiet)
I shall.

SHERIFF HUNT
Sorry 'bout Saucy.

CHICORY
Yeah. She was top quality.

BROODER
Thank you.

Sheriff Hunt looks at Arthur.

SHERIFF HUNT
We'll carry your stuff.
(he points west)
Go on and get ahead of us.

The cowboy nods his head, draws his gun, flings the cylinder, plucks the spent cartridges and reloads. Nearby, Chicory picks up two canteens and Arthur's tapered hat.

ARTHUR
When you pack, be sure and get her medical kit.

SHERIFF HUNT
We will.

The cowboy receives his hat from the oldster and slings the proffered canteens over his left shoulder.

CHICORY
Watch the terrain. One bad fall could be the end of that leg.

ARTHUR
I'll be mindful.

Arthur turns away from the lawmen, faces the western horizon and ambles forward. Presently, Sheriff Hunt and Chicory sort through their possessions.

CHICORY
Over in Mississippi, Nadine and I saw a cripple who had crutches and only one leg race against a regular man and win. He made these huge strides--swinging himself to and fro like a pendulum--and was uncommonly hasty.

The sworn man empties a valise onto his bedroll.

SHERIFF HUNT
It isn't the same with a hurt leg.

CHICORY
I'm just pointing out possibilities.

EXT. OPEN PLAINS - JUST BEFORE DAWN

Arthur, employing his crutch, advances steadily across the vast azure plain. His eyes scan the ground for any aberrations that might result in a fall.

Presently, he looks ahead to the western horizon, which is a blank slate, featureless excepting a few bushes and cacti.

The cowboy returns his attention to the terrain and continues forward, mindful of every stride.

Sunlight picks out rocks and scraggly vegetation, casting their shadows long on the sere terrain over which Arthur travels. His pain and pace are equally constant.

A YAWN like a slow scream spreads across his face.

After he shuts his mouth, a stone CRACKS, and his crutch slips. Startled, he squeezes the grip, securing the brace, keeping himself upright. Somewhere in the distance, a bird KEENS.

A moment later, Arthur swings his legs forward and continues.

EXT. OPEN PLAINS - EARLY MORNING

The cowboy advances, his long shadow sticking to him like jet black taffy. Dimly visible on the western horizon are five jagged mountain peaks.

A weak SHOUT dissipates as it travels across the terrain.

SHERIFF HUNT(O.S.)
Mr. O'Dwyer!

The name ECHOES. Arthur turns around, squints and looks east. In the distance and limned by the rising sun are three tiny figures-- two broad men of medium height and a tall skinny fellow. Light shines golden on a spyglass and disappears, accompanied by the CLACK-CLACK-CLACK of its telescopic segments being collapsed.

SHERIFF HUNT (CONT'D)
You okay?

The inquiry ECHOES.

ARTHUR
I'm fine!

The response ECHOES. The cowboy drinks from his canteen, closes the container and YAWNS, sunlight glaring on his teeth, tongue and palate. Presently, he shuts his mouth, turns around and continues his westward journey.

EXT. OPEN PLAINS - TEN O'CLOCK IN THE MORNING

Arthur walks alongside Sheriff Hunt, Chicory and Brooder. The three able-bodied men are burdened with rucksacks, valises, waterskins, bedrolls, canteens and guns.

CHICORY
I wonder if Peter will enjoy
Mexican food.

Nobody offers a comment. The sheriff glances at the cowboy, appraises his gait and returns his attention to the horizon.

CHICORY (CONT'D)
I imagine he'll like tamales.

Brooder, sweating and weary, looks over at Chicory.

CHICORY (CONT'D)
But if they give him a hot pepper,
they'll get a hoof in the face.

BROODER
Aren't you tired?

CHICORY
Of course. We're on the plain
pretending to be pack mules.

BROODER
But that doesn't in any way affect
the endeavors of your mouth?

CHICORY
You'd prefer to listen to trudging
footsteps and men breathing?
(he SPITS dust)
That makes it worse.

Arthur's crutch slips. He GRUNTS as he regains control of the brace. The other men stop and look at him.

ARTHUR
Keep on. I'll catch up.

CHICORY
You sure?

ARTHUR
There ain't a choice.
(he looks west)
And when you get to hard ground,
put four stones showin' your route
every hundred yards.

SHERIFF HUNT
We will.

CHICORY
You should take this if you're
trailing-

Chicory produces his spyglass and hangs it by its leather strap over Arthur's neck.

CHICORY (CONT'D)
We have Mr. Brooder's German.

Sheriff Hunt continues forward, flanked by Chicory and Brooder. A moment later, Arthur resumes his pendulous gait, several yards behind his companions.

CHICORY (CONT'D)
I believe Peter will learn to appreciate Mexican women.

The handsome fellow drinks a swig from his whisky flask, which he seals and replaces in his jacket.

BROODER
I'm starting to envy that horse.

EXT. OPEN PLAINS - ELEVEN IN THE MORNING

Arthur upends one of his canteens, pours its small remainder into his mouth and swallows. After closing the empty vessel, he looks west and sees the three tiny dots that are his travelling companions.

EXT. INCLINED TERRAIN - NOON

The sun is directly overhead. Atop a black puddle that is his own shadow, Arthur ascends a mild incline. He plants his crutch and pauses, surveying the horizon, breathing hard. The vast mountain range looms before him, and his companions are no longer visible.

Alone, the hobbling cowboy continues his journey west, tremulous and weak.

EXT. HARD TERRAIN NEAR COVERED NOOK - EARLY AFTERNOON

The bottom of a crutch CLACK against the hard ground, succeeded by the THUD of a dusty boot. The impact jolts Arthur's dangling leg, and he GRUNTS, pained.

A moment later, the cowboy pauses and looks at the vista. Within a distant nook, he sees several dark anomalies, including three people. He extends Chicory's spyglass, peers through its lenses and SIGHS with relief. The cowboy sits, leans his back against a big rock and looks over his shoulder. Fifty yards away lies the covered nook in which Sheriff Hunt, Chicory and Brooder lie atop their bedrolls, hats over their faces, guns in their hands.

Arthur, concealed behind the stone, fills his lungs and puts his cupped hands alongside his mouth.

ARTHUR
(calling out)
This's Arthur O'Dwyer! I'm comin' into camp!

The words ECHO.

SHERIFF HUNT
We won't shoot.

CHICORY
Almost certainly.

Arthur reclaims his crutch.

BROODER
Mind the trip line.

The cowboy steps over a hidden wire and ambles into the nook, joining his companions, who lie on their bedrolls with hats over their faces.

SHERIFF HUNT
Been here two hours. We're leavin' at twilight.

ARTHUR
Wake me then.

Arthur hobbles to the empty bedroll, which has a second cushion at its bottom for his injured leg, lies down, puts his hat over his eyes and is instantly asleep.

EXT. COVERED NOOK - TWILIGHT

With the toe of his right boot, the sheriff nudges the cowboy's left shoulder.

SHERIFF HUNT
Time to get up.

Arthur removes his hat from his bleary eyes, YAWNS and looks at his surroundings, which are painted gold by the setting sun. He reaches for his crutch, and pain lances up his right leg. As he waits for the sensation to pass, the oldster approaches him.

CHICORY
Brooder found a pond, and we filled your canteens and put some provisions in that squirrel bag-
(he points to a plump kerchief)
(MORE)

CHICORY (CONT'D)
It’s things that have a lot of food energy-- cheese and nuts and some beef collops.

ARTHUR
I appreciate it.

Nearby, Brooder and Sheriff Hunt, chewing dried beef, gather and pack their supplies.

SHERIFF HUNT
Mr. O’Dwyer.

ARTHUR
Sheriff?

SHERIFF HUNT
We’ll mark our route with the four rocks so you can see it.

ARTHUR
No.

Employing his crutch, the cowboy rises from his bedroll. He sways, momentarily lightheaded from his exertion, and finds his balance.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)
I’m comin’ with you now.

SHERIFF HUNT
Follow after at your own pace.

Brooder swallows beef and looks at Arthur.

BROODER
If we get there before you catch up, I’ll try to refrain from flirting with Mrs. O’Dwyer.

Arthur CRACKS a fist across Brooder’s jaw. Overbalanced, the cowboy tumbles and SMACKS his shin on a stone.

He YELLS.

The lawmen hasten to their fallen companion, whose agonized cry ECHOES all around them.

Brooder SPITS, rubs his chin and looks down at Arthur, who holds his wounded leg, teeth clenched, his eyes filled with burning vitriol.

ARTHUR
Don’t talk that way about my wife! I know you had designs!

BROODER
That was years ago, and she refused me. And right now, I’m risking my life for both of you, which perhaps entitles me to an occasional innuendo.

ARTHUR
It doesn’t! She’s my whole everything and those savages got her- and- and-
(tears fill his eyes)
And who knows- who knows what’s happenin’ to her right now, every second we delay- and...and...

Sheriff Hunt squeezes Arthur’s shoulder in a conciliatory manner and looks at Brooder.

SHERIFF HUNT
Remove yourself.

The handsome fellow rubs his jaw, shakes his head in disbelief and walks away from the others.

Chicory looks at Arthur’s right leg. Fresh bright blood stains the fabric.

CHICORY
Damnation.
(to the sheriff)
Will you unearth that medical kit?

The sworn man walks toward a rucksack, and the oldster looks at the cowboy.

CHICORY (CONT'D)
Hold still while I make an examination.

Arthur nods his head. Chicory gently removes his patient’s right boot and sock and peels back his sodden pant cuff. Three inches below the cowboy’s knee, a broken bone presses against the skin, surrounded by torn stitches and blood.

CHICORY (CONT'D)
Damnation.

The sheriff sets the medical kit beside the oldster, who looks up at him and shakes his head.

A cold feeling spreads within sworn man's stomach, and he ruminates how to best convey the awful news to the cowboy.

SHERIFF HUNT
You're stayin' behind.

The cowboy is stunned.

ARTHUR
No. I'm comin'.

SHERIFF HUNT
You can't.

Arthur reaches for his crutch, but Sheriff Hunt picks it up and flings it east. Fifteen feet away, it SMACKS against the nook wall and CLATTERS upon the ground. The cowboy is furious

ARTHUR
Go get me my-

SHERIFF HUNT
That leg can't be disregarded.
You're stayin' put.

ARTHUR
To Hell with your authority and your way of doin' things! You shouldn't've shot that drifter back in Bright Hope and got my wife involved, and Brooder shouldn't've executed them Mexicans and made it all worse.

SHERIFF HUNT
I can't honestly say I know which way it would've gone with the Mexicans or if I left that drifter alone. I am quick to shoot--maybe too quick--though I know I've done a lot more good than bad over the years. But here's where we are.
(he shakes his head)
You can't go anywhere on that leg.
Look at it.

Arthur looks at his shin and is nauseated by the sight.

Turning his gaze away, he looks at Chicory, who has his back turned as he sorts through the contents of the medical bag.

Metal CLANKS.

An awful suspicion knots Arthur’s stomach, and the color drains from his face.

Arthur looks for his voice, and Sheriff Hunt CLEARS his throat.

SHERIFF HUNT (CONT'D)
Chicory’s gonna have to remove it. You’ll have-

ARTHUR
No! You can’t take it. I won’t let you take it.

SHERIFF HUNT
If we don’t, gangrene’ll take root, and you’ll-

ARTHUR
It’s my choice to make, and I’m sayin’ no.

Sheriff Hunt relents, exchanges a morbid glance with Chicory, and nods his head.

SHERIFF HUNT
Okay.

ARTHUR
(to Chicory)
Can you set it?

CHICORY
I can set it.

Filling his lungs, the cowboy looks at the sheriff.

ARTHUR
Will you leave some stones for me to follow? In case something happens to you all-- so I’ve got a option.

SHERIFF HUNT
I’ll mark the route.

ARTHUR
Thanks.

From the medical kit, Chicory withdraws the stoppered bottle that is labelled, ‘Tincture of Opium.’

ARTHUR (CONT'D)
Just give me the minimum so you can operate-- I don’t wanna wake up next month. And take the rest in case my wife needs it or Deputy Nick.

CHICORY
I’ll bring some in a whisky flask and leave the remainder with you. Don’t take more than a spoonful in a day.

The oldster plucks the stopper, POP, and pours a very small amount of the rust-colored tincture into a wooden soup spoon, which he hands to the cowboy. Arthur ingests the opiate and returns the utensil to Chicory.

CHICORY (CONT'D)
Lean back.

The cowboy scoots onto his bedroll, lies down and looks at the gathered men.

ARTHUR
I don’t know if I’ll be awake when you go, so I want to apologize now for gettin’ hot at you all. I don’t lose my temper most times.

SHERIFF HUNT
We know you don’t.

BROODER
Don’t concern yourself over it.

CHICORY
I thought it made things exciting.

ARTHUR
I appreciate what you all are doin’. Don’t think I ain’t appreciative. Just please get her safe.

SHERIFF HUNT
We won’t leave ‘til she’s in our care.

Sadness and gratitude burgeon in the cowboy’s breast, and for a moment, he cannot speak.

CHICORY
Is the medicine taking affect?

Arthur waggles his fingers and clears his throat.

ARTHUR
My hands got some tingles.

Chicory looks at Brooder and Sheriff Hunt.

CHICORY
Brace him. The tincture helps, but this will penetrate.

The handsome fellow grips the cowboy's ankles, and the sworn man secures the cowboy's shoulders.

From the medical kit, Chicory withdraws a steel, double-sided bone hammer. Arthur reaches for his hat and puts it over his face. Brooder and Sheriff Hunt turn their heads.

EXT. MOUNTAIN CREVASSE - SAME

An eagle sits upon a black branch that extends from the side of a deep crevasse. In a far off part of the mountain range, Arthur YELLS.

The bird is unaffected by the sound of his agony.

EXT. OPEN PLAINS - SAME

The YELL resounds. A coyote pulls iridescent guts from the carcass of a rabbit, uninterested in the human exclamation.

EXT. SALTPAN - SAME

The YELL resounds. A horned lizard monitors a hole with its crenulate eyes. From the aperture emerges a black, eight-legged meal.

EXT. COVERED NOOK - DUSK

A diffuse blue glow has replaced the sharp gold of twilight. Sheriff Hunt, Chicory and Brooder, carrying their burdens, depart from the nook, leaving behind Arthur, who sleeps on his bedroll, his hurt leg raised and covered.

BROODER
So long cowboy.

A moment before the three men turn the corner, the oldster glances over his shoulder, his face evincing a mixture of concern and guilt.

Sheriff Hunt, Chicory and Brooder ascend a moderate incline, and the vast mountain range looms all around them, its form silhouetted by the dark purple sky. Held in the sworn man's right hand is a compass, which he glances at and pockets.

SHERIFF HUNT
Will he survive?

CHICORY
He has a chance.

EXT. BARREN ROCKY INCLINE - NIGHT

The three men ascend a rocky slope, their FOOTFALLS heavy and their BREATHING thick. Overhead, the half moon glares at them from a vault that is strewn with ragged clouds.

Sheriff Hunt pauses, drinks from a canteen and wipes moisture from his brindled beard, his shoulders rising and falling as his lungs strive to replenish themselves.

The other men stop and reach for their containers. In the quietude, the sworn man descries a peculiar sound-- a distant EERIE WHISTLE.

SHERIFF HUNT
Hear that?

Brooder swallows water and listens, as does Chicory. The dark environs are silent.

BROODER
What are you hearing?

SHERIFF HUNT
It stopped. Just wait a-

The EERIE WHISTLE echoes across the terrain for a brief duration. All three men hear the sound.

CHICORY
Thought I was imagining that.

BROODER
I am fairly certain that I heard that sound back in Bright Hope-- on the night of the kidnapping.

CHICORY
Sheriff?

SHERIFF HUNT
It's a signal. Maybe an alarm.

Again, the EERIE WHISTLE resonates and dies.

SHERIFF HUNT (CONT'D)
Inspect your firearms. We've been spotted.

Brooder checks his pistol and unslings his repeater rifle; Sheriff Hunt withdraws his revolver and SNAPS it in half; Chicory wipes grit from the barrels of his shotgun.

EXT. BARREN ROCKY PLATEAU - LATER

Across the moonlit plateau, the three men walk, their eyes alert. Sheriff Hunt pauses, picks up several rocks and continues forward, a few yards behind his companions, listening. Nothing is audible to him except for the sounds that his group generates-- FOOTFALLS and BREATHING.

The sworn man leans over, sets a stone upon the ground and inches away places another, followed by two more equidistant siblings in an even line.

CHICORY
It is the official opinion of the backup deputy that leaving a trail of rocks is a job for the backup deputy.

SHERIFF HUNT
I told him I'd do it.

The sheriff rejoins his companions, and hears an EERIE WHISTLE in the distance.

SHERIFF HUNT (CONT'D)
Was that it?

BROODER
Yes.

SHERIFF HUNT
Sounds further than before.

CHICORY
Maybe they're frightened?

BROODER
Of us? No.

As the men continue west, Chicory looks at Brooder and attempts to read his inscrutable face.

CHICORY
How many of them did you kill?

BROODER
Not enough.

Sheriff Hunt frowns, but holds his tongue.

CHICORY
They were--what do you call them--
braves? Warriors?

BROODER
Mostly.

CHICORY
Some weren't braves?

BROODER
Some weren't men.

CHICORY
Oh.

Sheriff Hunt and Chicory are disturbed by what they have just learned about their travelling companion.

BROODER
An Indian woman is still an Indian.
She knows how to use a bow and a
spear, and so do her children.

CHICORY
Why do you hate them so much?

BROODER
You should ask my mother and my
sisters.

CHICORY
I never met them.

BROODER
That's correct. You never did.

A moment later, the implication of Brooder's response becomes clear to Chicory.

CHICORY
Indians got them?

SHERIFF HUNT
Let him alone, old man.

The handsome fellow walks, his mind heavy with very unpleasant memories.

BROODER
A thing like that makes a considerable impression upon a ten-year-old boy.

CHICORY
I'm sorry that happened to them, but I couldn't ever kill a woman or a child, even if-

SHERIFF HUNT
Deputy. Quiet.

Chicory closes the aperture in his beard and turns his attention forward. Ahead of him, mountains cover over the major part of the western sky.

EXT. EDGE OF THE PLATEAU - JUST BEFORE DAWN (EARLY MORNING)

The sky glows weakly, intimating dawn and coloring everything dark blue. Sheriff Hunt places the fourth rock in a line, rises and walks over to Chicory and Brooder, who stand at the edge of a plateau. Employing his German telescope, the handsome fellow scans the depressed area to the west.

SHERIFF HUNT
See it?

BROODER
I see several.

Brooder studies his subjects. Upon the outermost lens of his spyglass, the moonlit landscape glows.

CHICORY
Can you tell which one's the Valley of the Starving Men?

BROODER
I cannot.

Brooder proffers the gold-and-ivory instrument to Chicory.

CHICORY
You trust me with the German?

BROODER
I've seen you operate.

The oldster puffs up with pride, claims the fine instrument, and with it surveys the western depression.

CHICORY
Oh my Lord.

Sheriff Hunt and Brooder look at Chicory.

CHICORY (CONT'D)
I wish I had this when I went to the rodeo. The clarity and magnifying power are-

SHERIFF HUNT
Do you see the valleys?

CHICORY
I see a few.
(he scans the area)
They all look the same.
(he glances at Brooder)
May Sheriff Hunt look through the German?

BROODER
He may.

Chicory gives the telescope to Sheriff Hunt, who puts the instrument to his right eye. After a quick survey of the depression, he points the device to the same spot as did his two predecessors and studies the area, ruminating.

SHERIFF HUNT
We'll start with the nearest one.

Brooder kneels, unslings his repeater rifle, withdraws a telescopic sight from his valise and screws it to the long range weapon.

BROODER
I'll take the vanguard. One of you should monitor the rear with the German.

The sheriff collapses the spyglass, CLACK-CLACK-CLACK, slides it inside his jacket and looks at the handsome fellow.

SHERIFF HUNT
If you hear or see anything, point it out before you start shooting.

BROODER
I shall if it doesn't forfeit my opportunity.

SHERIFF HUNT
We’re here for a rescue, not a massacre.

Brooder grins, turns to the edge of the plateau and starts his descent, trailed by Chicory. Behind them, Sheriff Hunt drops four more stones and follows.

Illuminated by the glaring half moon, the three men walk down an incline, treading softly, their eyes alert. Brooder, at the vanguard, sees something of importance and motions to his companions. Presently, the lawmen join their peer, who stands still, pointing his right index finger at faint markings on the ground that cut across their current course.

BROODER
Horse tracks.

CHICORY
Mr. Wallington’s or ours?

SHERIFF HUNT
See if you find a set where one horse--a smaller one--is missing a shoe on a hind leg.

They survey the hoofprints, looking for the specific pattern.

CHICORY
Here.

Brooder and Sheriff Hunt walk over to Chicory, who is at the edge of the horse tracks, near an isolated set that is more closely grouped than are the others. With the toe of his boot, the oldster taps an unshod hoofprint.

CHICORY (CONT'D)
This is Clarence’s colt?

SHERIFF HUNT
Almost certainly.

CHICORY
So we’re changing course?

SHERIFF HUNT
Yeah.

Brooder faces northwest and continues forward, trailed by Chicory. Behind them, Sheriff Hunt places four rocks on the ground, rights himself and follows.

EXT. DECLINING SLOPE WITH SPARSE VEGETATION - DAWN

Brooder stops, looks through the telescopic sight atop his repeater rifle and surveys the western vista. Presently, he waves his hand and is joined by Chicory and Sheriff Hunt.

BROODER
(quietly)
The tracks veer west, into a defile.

A weight descends upon the lawmen.

SHERIFF HUNT
(quietly)
So this is it.

Brooder grips his repeater rifle with both hands and walks forward. Chicory, anxious but determined, wipes his forehead and follows in second position, carrying his shotgun. Sheriff Hunt places four stones on the ground and advances, his right palm on the ivory handle of his revolver.

EXT. SOTOL BUSHES / DEFILE ENTRANCE - MOMENTS LATER

Brooder enters a broad defile, puts his left eye to his telescopic sight, scans the twelve foot walls on either side of the passage and proceeds west, monitoring the line of sotol bushes that parallels the wall on his right.

Fifteen yards behind the handsome fellow walks Chicory, holding his shotgun, followed by Sheriff Hunt, who pauses, turns around and looks east through the German spyglass, where he sees nothing that concerns him.

EXT. WIDE DEFILE - SAME

The three men proceed along the pass. At the vanguard, Brooder descries three small white objects on the north wall, and looks at them through the lenses atop his rifle. After a derisive SNORT, he lowers his weapon and continues forward.

Presently, he reaches the anomalies. Affixed to the defile wall are the skulls of a boar, a wolf and a vulture.

Brooder continues west, and ten seconds later, Chicory passes by the three sentries, unsettled by their presence. Shortly afterwards, Sheriff Hunt walks past the same spot, frowning.

The handsome fellow sees something that concerns him, slows his gait, takes a few more steps and stops.

Ahead of him is a blind corner where the defile turns sharply to the right. He motions to the lawmen, and they gather beside him.

SHERIFF HUNT
(quietly)
Think there's an ambush around that bend?

BROODER
(quietly)
I'll signal once I've made a determination. If you don't hear from me in thirty seconds, go-

The handsome man points back to the defile entrance. Grave expressions darken the faces of the lawmen.

CHICORY
(quietly)
What's the signal?

Brooder claims a fist-sized rock from the ground.

BROODER
(quietly)
This.

The handsome fellow pockets the stone, grips his rifle and walks toward the bend. Behind him, the sworn man withdraws a timepiece, and the oldster caresses his shotgun as if it were a pet.

After three more strides, Brooder disappears around the corner. Sheriff Hunt looks down, and the second hand on his watch TICKS past the number '5.'

Presently, the handsome fellow's FOOTFALLS grow too quiet for the lawmen to hear. Chicory looks at the watch, and the second hand TICKS past the number '6.'

Sheriff Hunt raises the spyglass to his right eye. After an appraisal of the blue environs, he returns his attention to the watch. The small hand TICKS past the number '8,' indicating fifteen seconds have passed.

Concerned, the lawmen glance at each other and look toward the bend. Upon the timepiece, the small hand TICKS past the number '9.' Twenty seconds have passed.

The lawmen point their guns toward the bend. The watch TICKS. Something CLACKS beyond the corner, and the rock rolls into view.

Sheriff Hunt replaces his timepiece, glances back and walks toward the bend, flanked by Chicory.

EXT. VALLEY OF THE STARVING MEN - SAME

The lawmen round the corner and join the handsome vanguard. Ahead of him lies a valley that has a sunken floor and steeply-inclined sides, which are more than ninety feet tall. High up on the west wall are the four dark cave mouths that Brooder monitors with his telescopic sight.

SHERIFF HUNT
(whispered)
See any activity in those?

A stone SMACKS Brooder’s skull. An arrow pierces Sheriff Hunt’s left shoulder, and a bone tomahawk wipes the hat from Chicory’s head, SCRAPING his scalp.

Prone, Brooder reaches for his rifle. A tomahawk cuts off his left hand.

The lawmen spin to the close wall, where two shadow-obscured figures leap from a raised niche, bearing bone tomahawks. One wears EAGLE SKULLS; the other is a Noseless Troglodyte.

Chicory, blood running from his rent scalp, squeezes his trigger, BOOM. Eagle Skulls SLAMS into the wall, sounding an EERIE WHISTLE. Sheriff Hunt fires upon the other, BANG, BANG. Blood sprays, and the Noseless Troglodyte stumbles back, sounding an EERIE WHISTLE.

The lawmen pull triggers. GUNSHOTS ring out, and the slain men quaver on the ground, dying and WHISTLING.

Nearby, the handsome fellow clutches his shorn left arm.

BROODER
Chicory. Tie this off.

Chicory hastens to Brooder, pulls a kerchief from his jacket and wraps it around the gory stump. Pale and perspiring, the handsome fellow sits up and leans his back against the wall.

BROODER (CONT'D)
I need the repeater.

Sheriff Hunt picks up the rifle, gives to Brooder and pulls the arrow from his own shoulder.

BROODER (CONT'D)
Supply me with dynamite and don’t return until I’ve used it.

SHERIFF HUNT
Brooder. We can take you some-

BROODER
We're too isolated, and I am far too vain to ever live as a cripple.
(he stamps the ground with his left boot)
This is my spot.

Sheriff Hunt sees that the injured fellow is fully resolved and so wastes no more words. Chicory, his hands covered with blood, draws four sticks of dynamite from his rucksack and sets them beside Brooder.

BROODER (CONT'D)
I'd like a cigar.

The oldster draws a cigar from the handsome fellow's pocket, pokes it between his lips and SCRATCHES a match.

BROODER (CONT'D)
The answer to your question is one hundred and sixteen.

Chicory, surprised, touches the flame to the smokable-- a brilliant red nexus in an otherwise blue landscape.

CHICORY
That's how many Indians?

Brooder drags on his cigar and EXHALES a plume of smoke.

Sheriff Hunt TAPS Chicory's left shoulder, prompting him.

CHICORY (CONT'D)
Goodbye Mr. Brooder.

SHERIFF HUNT
We'll make sure all this has value.

BROODER
Please do.
(he looks away)
I shall kill as many as I can.

The lawmen hasten from the valley, leaving the handsome fellow alone.

For a moment, tears sparkle in his eyes, along with an awareness of many, many things.

As quickly as it came, the sadness departs, and Brooder turns his attention to Eagle Skulls, the nearer of the two dead TROGLODYTES. The strong, long-haired native is covered with dirt and has various animal bones attached to his body (ribs on his chest, bird skulls in his hair and talons on his fingertips) and a swollen horizontal slit across his throat from which protrude a cluster of conjoined skeletal pipes.

With the stock of his rifle, Brooder WHACKS the Troglodyte's stomach. The throat pipes produce the familiar EERIE WHISTLE.

The call is answered by an EERIE WHISTLE from one of the four cave mouths along the western wall, and Brooder grins.

Again, he WHACKS the corpse's stomach, producing the EERIE WHISTLE. This time, the handsome fellow and the corpse receive no reply.

Brooder aims his repeater rifle at the responsive cave, closes one eye, looks through his telescopic sight and waits.

Nearby, a TALL TROGLODYTE rises from a crease in the valley floor and throws a bone tomahawk at his head.

EXT. WIDE DEFILE - SAME

A GUNSHOT echoes from beyond the bend, and the lawmen, hastening up the defile, glance back.

SHERIFF HUNT
We'll get to that place where-

An arrow WHISTLES and pins Chicory's right forearm to his hip. His shotgun CLATTERS on the ground.

SHERIFF HUNT (CONT'D)
No.

Sheriff Hunt points his gun east, but sees no target at which to shoot. From a niche in the south wall speeds a troglodyte who wears a hollowed WOLF SKULL in front of his face.

Sheriff Hunt turns and fires, BANG. The bullet CRACKS the lupine mask, but does not divert the attacker, who SLAMS the sworn man to the ground and discards his gun.

Chicory, his right arm skewered to his hip, withdraws a knife with his left hand. A thrown rock SMACKS the back of his head, and he falls to the ground, glimpsing a MISSHAPEN TROGLODYTE that has uneven eyes, a dented face and a collapsed nose.

Sheriff Hunt, pinned to the ground by Wolf Skull, punches his assailant in the chest and face, bloodying his knuckles on bone armor. The troglodyte jams the handle of his tomahawk into the lawman's mouth and screws it in.

The sworn man COUGHS and struggles, and the native presses the bone deeper. COUGHS become GARGLES. The haft goes deeper and Sheriff Hunt cannot breathe at all.

The Misshapen Troglodyte leans over and SMACKS a rock against the side of Sheriff Hunt's head, who passes out.

EXT. VALLEY OF THE STARVING MEN - SAME

The lawmen are dragged by their ankles into the valley, pulled by Wolf Skull and the Misshapen Troglodyte. Sheriff Hunt is unconscious and Chicory struggles to remain awake.

Presently, the oldster sees the dead natives, Noseless Troglodyte and Eagle Skulls and beyond them, Brooder, who is leaning against the valley wall, his face split in half by a bone tomahawk. Opposite the sitting corpse lies the Tall Troglodyte, who has a bullet hole in the exact middle of his forehead. Chicory's dwindling hopes are further diminished by the sight.

CHICORY
(mumbled)
Need to let him know.

The oldster glances at the Misshapen Troglodyte who drags him, sees that his attention is elsewhere and extends his free hand. Rocks accumulate in his cupped palm and he releases them in a linear grouping of four.

Wolf Skull tilts his head back and blows his throat pipes, producing the EERIE WHISTLE. Chicory looks up. Two ropes flit like birds from a cave mouth fifty feet overhead, fall through the air and THUD upon the ground.

Lying in the cloud of raised dust are a pair of nooses.

The Troglodytes fit the loops around the necks of the lawmen and blow their EERIE WHISTLES. Sheriff Hunt is jerked awake by his noose and pulled up the incline toward the cave. Rocks trickle down in his wake.

CHICORY (CONT'D)
Help us, Lord Jes-

The cinched noose precludes Chicory's prayer, and he SCRAPES up the valley wall. Presently, the arrow that pins his right arm to his hip snags in a crevice and is torn loose.

His eyes water, but he does not have enough air in his lungs to produce a yell.

INT. ENTRANCE TUNNEL / THE TROGLODYTES' CAVE - SAME

Chicory is dragged by his neck across the coarse ground of a tunnel, SCRAPING grit, and ahead of him are the kicking boots of Sheriff Hunt.

A troglodyte with a SERRATED TOMAHAWK and another with SHARP TEETH navigate a bend, and the draggled lawmen SMACK into a wall. Darkness engulfs them, and the sounds of their bodies SCRAPING across the grit are punctuated by THUMPS and GRUNTS.

INT. CENTRAL DEN / THE TROGLODYTES' CAVE - SAME

Sheriff Hunt and Chicory are dragged into a square, forty-foot-wide chamber that is illuminated by two diagonal shafts of daylight and the red-orange coals of a fire pit. Serrated Tomahawk and Sharp Teeth discard the ropes, and the lawmen pull the nooses from their necks and GASP, filling their lungs with air. A moment later, the tomahawk-wielding captor walks past a squat alcove that is barricaded by a row of thick wooden posts and stands beside a dark open hallway.

Sheriff Hunt, WHEEZING, draws a kerchief from his pocket and points at Chicory's most significant injury.

SHERIFF HUNT
Let me t-

He COUGHS. The oldster extends his right arm, and the sworn man wraps a kerchief around the wound and ties a knot. Somewhere, something SHUFFLES.

WOMAN'S VOICE (O.S.)
Sheriff Hunt? Mr. Kory?

The lawmen, surprised, look at the barricaded alcove.

SHERIFF HUNT
Mrs. O'Dwyer?

SAMANTHA
I'm here.

The bruised and scratched face of Samantha O'Dwyer appears on the far side of the wooden posts.

SHERIFF HUNT
Are y-

Sharp Teeth shoves Sheriff Hunt with his foot and waves his bone tomahawk at a barricaded alcove that is missing two wooden posts.

SAMANTHA
Go in or they'll kill you.

The lawmen crawl into the four foot tall nook. Behind them, Sharp Teeth slides a wooden post into a perfectly-sized, two foot deep hole in the floor and installs its neighbor, so that there is no gap in the barricade. Presently, he slots thick pegs through the grooves at the top of the wooden bars, CLACK, CLACK, securing them to the wall.

Sheriff Hunt and Chicory look outside their prison. Across the glowing coals on the far side of the den is the pale oval that is Samantha O'Dwyer's face.

SHERIFF HUNT
Are you hurt?

SAMANTHA
I'm alive.

SHERIFF HUNT
Is Nick with you?

The woman's eyes flicker to the darkness behind her and return, glossy and morose.

SAMANTHA
He's not well.

SHERIFF HUNT
The drifter?

SAMANTHA
They ate him.

FOOTFALLS resound in the far hallway, garnering the woman's attention. She sees something and shudders.

SAMANTHA (CONT'D)
Not him.

Into the room strides BOAR TUSKS, a massive troglodyte with vulture skulls on his chest and groin, a huge tomahawk in his left hand, an open nasal cavity and ten sharpened Boar Tusks protruding from his cheeks. He points at Samantha's alcove, tilts his head back and BLASTS his throat pipes.

The woman covers her ears. Across the way, Sheriff Hunt grips the posts and Chicory trembles.

CHICORY
We're in Hell.
(he wipes his eyes)
This can't be any other place.

Heeding the chieftain's command, the two subordinate Troglodytes walk to Samantha's alcove, pluck two pegs, discard two posts and walk inside.

SAMANTHA
Don't take him!

Presently, the Serrated Tomahawk and Sharp Teeth drag Nick from the alcove by his ankles. His clothing is torn, and his body is covered with bruises and blood.

SHERIFF HUNT
Nick! Wake up!

SAMANTHA
Don't do this. Please!

Samantha seizes the baby-faced deputy's arms, and Sharp Teeth SMACKS her skull with the side of his tomahawk. The woman passes out and falls over.

Stunned, Chicory stares at the tableau.

SHERIFF HUNT
Nick! Wake up!

Sheriff Hunt grips a post with both hands and pushes forward. The posts do not yield.

The Troglodytes set Nick near the coals, and Boar Tusks SKIRLS his neck pipes.

SHERIFF HUNT (CONT'D)
Goddammit Nick wake up!

The troglodytes pull the pants from the unconscious young deputy.

SHERIFF HUNT (CONT'D)
Chicory.

Chicory looks at Sheriff Hunt.

SHERIFF HUNT (CONT'D)
We've gotta break through!

Beside him, Chicory applies himself to the same task.

The Troglodytes pull a shirt from the chest of Deputy Nick, revealing his bruised skin. Consciousness returns to the baby-faced deputy.

The sworn man and the oldster strain desperately against the barricade, their red faces purpling, but the thick posts are unaffected by their exertions.

SHERIFF HUNT (CONT'D)
Harder old man! We've gotta.

A bone tomahawk CRACKS into a post, through Sheriff Hunt's left hand. He SHOUTS, and Chicory pulls him back.

Beside the long toenails of Boar Tusks are the tips of the sworn man's pinky and a ring fingers.

NICK
Sheriff Hunt?
(he looks around)
You here?

Sheriff Hunt, clutching his bleeding hand, looks beyond the posts at the young deputy, who had been stripped naked.

SHERIFF HUNT
I'm here.

NICK
You were right about that drifter.
He killed a lot of people-
(he COUGHS wetly)
Butchered them in their sleep and
robbed them. His name was Purvis.

The subordinate Troglodytes grab Nick's arms, sit him upright and brace him.

NICK (CONT'D)
And he desecrated the burial ground
of these things-- whatever they
are. He raved about it all in the
end.

SHERIFF HUNT
Thanks for telling me.

Boar Tusks leans his tomahawk against the wall and draws a bone knife from a leather sheath.

NICK
That man deserved to die.

Sheriff Hunt’s guilt and sadness are not in any way alleviated by the deputy’s remark.

SHERIFF HUNT
All right.

NICK
Will you send my possessions back to Michigan?
(he COUGHS wetly)
A lot of that stuff belongs to my brothers.

SHERIFF HUNT
I’ll send it.

NICK
Thank y-

The chieftain clamps Nick’s face and slices into his scalp. The deputy SHRIEKS, and the subordinate Troglodytes tighten their grip. Boar Tusks cuts a circuit around his head, rocking the blade back and forth.

Chicory turns away from the awful scene, shaking, his eyes wide with terror. Sheriff Hunt watches, nauseated.

SHERIFF HUNT
Nick. I want you to know that all these savages are gonna be massacred-- the militia’s on its way and they’re gonna butcher every last one of these godless things.

Nick kicks the ground, squirming and SHRIEKING. Boar Tusks peels the scalp from his head, revealing pink and yellow tissue and hard white bone.

Tears shine in Sheriff Hunt’s eyes, but he does not look away from his deputy.

Boar Tusks RIPS the flap loose, and Nick YELLS.

Presently, the chieftain balls up the scalp and shoves it into the deputy’s mouth. The young man squirms, CHOKING on his own hair and skin.

SHERIFF HUNT (CONT'D)
(quietly)
I’m sorry.

Boar Tusks tilts Nick’s head back and thrusts the knife into his mouth, pinning the scalp to his hard palate. A moment later, the GURGLING young man passes out.

A SKIRL emerges from Boar Tusks's throat pipes, and the other Troglodytes release Nick, who tips over, muzzled by his own hair and skin.

The chieftain reclaims his huge bone tomahawk.

Tears drip from Sheriff Hunt's eyes, but he does not look away from his deputy.

The natives grab Nick by the ankles and lift him so that he hangs upside down. They pull his feet far apart so that his groin is exposed to the ceiling.

Boar Tusks raises his bone tomahawk.

SHERIFF HUNT (CONT'D)
Don't!

The axe CHOPS into Nick's groin, and the inverted man awakens, squirming, agonized, CHOKING on the hairy gag that is his own scalp. His bare skull CLACKS against the floor.

Boar Tusks yanks the bone tomahawk loose and swings it again. A wedge of skin sloughs from the victim's nexus, followed by a torrent of blood.

The chieftain SKIRLS and the subordinate Troglodytes yank Nick's ankles in opposite directions. Something SNAPS. Presently, they pull harder and the inverted man's fractured pelvic bone CRACKS.

His waist stretches. Skin and sinew RIP, and coils of intestines burst from the opening.

Sheriff Hunt dry heaves, but does not avert his eyes. Behind him, Chicory faces the wall, sobbing.

INT. CENTRAL DEN / THE TROGLODYTES' CAVE - LATER

All of the troglodytes have departed with their meals, excepting Wolf Skull, who picks up a pale right leg, bites into it and carries it toward the western hallway, pulling on pale tendons with his long teeth. Sheriff Hunt, his shorn fingers wrapped with a necktie, watches the native depart and glances over at Samantha, who sleeps in the resealed western alcove. Presently, the sworn man looks at Chicory, who sits nearby, staring at his boots.

CHICORY
That wasn't true, was it? What you said?

SHERIFF HUNT
What?

CHICORY
About the militia coming?

Chicory raises his head, his eyes shining with that one desperate hope.

SHERIFF HUNT
No. It wasn't.

The oldster's eyes go dim and he looks at his boots.

CHICORY
I thought there was a possibility
that you had a secret backup plan.

SHERIFF HUNT
Sorry old man.

Silence hangs heavy between them. Outside the alcove, glowing coals CRACKLE.

CHICORY
Why'd you say that to him?

SHERIFF HUNT
If they were doin' that to me, it's
the only thing I'd want to hear.

CHICORY
That you'd be avenged?

SAMANTHA
What happened to my husband?

Sheriff Hunt and Chicory look between their posts, past coals, roasting bones and more posts and see the pale face of Samantha O'Dwyer.

SAMANTHA (CONT'D)
Is he dead?

SHERIFF HUNT
He's alive.

Relief washes over Samantha, but the feeling ends the moment her next thought occurs.

SAMANTHA
Arthur wouldn't have allowed you to
attempt this rescue without him.

SHERIFF HUNT
He came along, but got injured a day ago. He's convalescing.

CHICORY
We put a trail for him.

Anger darkens the woman's face.

SAMANTHA
Why did you do that?

CHICORY
So he could follow us.

SAMANTHA
Here? To this place?

Chicory moves his mouth, yet produces no words. Sheriff Hunt squeezes the oldster's shoulder and looks at Samantha.

SHERIFF HUNT
We didn't know what it was like.

SAMANTHA
This is why frontier life is so difficult. Not because of the Indians or the elements, but because of the idiots!

SHERIFF HUNT
I'm sorry ma'am.

CHICORY
We're sorry.

SAMANTHA
You're idiots! And Arthur's no better. I told him not to go on that roof, but he-

Samantha loses her voice. Tears shine in her eyes, and she turns away, sad and furious. Vertical shadows delineate her dusty hair and ragged robe.

SHERIFF HUNT
I implored him not to follow, but he's determined.

Across the way, Samantha wipes her eyes and SNIFFS, her back facing the lawmen.

SHERIFF HUNT (CONT'D)
We need to do what we can before he gets here-- so that he has a chance against them. We already killed two.

CHICORY
Brooder got one.

SHERIFF HUNT
Three then. Mrs. O'Dwyer-- do you know how many are in this clan?

The sheriff and the oldster watch the woman's back, awaiting an answer.

SHERIFF HUNT (CONT'D)
Mrs. O'Dwyer?

SAMANTHA
Twelve males, possibly more. And two pregnant females who are blind cripples.

SHERIFF HUNT
All right.
(to Chicory)
You still have that whisky flask?

CHICORY
Yeah, but it has that tincture stuff.

Surprised, Samantha turns around and looks at the lawmen. Chicory hands the steel vessel to Sheriff Hunt.

SAMANTHA
You have tincture of opium?

SHERIFF HUNT
We do.
(he shakes the flask)
How many troglodytes can we poison with three fingers worth?

EXT. COVERED NOOK - TWILIGHT

Twilight colors the landscape that surrounds the nook in which Arthur sleeps on his bedroll, his bad leg raised and a hat over his face. A cruciform shadow glides across the stones and its airborne owner KEENS, rousing the cowboy.

ARTHUR
Big James. Check and see if any calves went stray.

Arthur removes his hat from his sweaty face and wipes his eyes, disappointed by the world into which he has arisen.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)
Hell.

He sits up and grabs a canteen, which he opens and brings to his mouth. After several significant GULPS, he wipes his lips, seals the vessel and looks at his leg.

Arthur RIPS a long swath from his bedroll and wraps it around his hurt shin, again and again, until the limb is surrounded by five inches of padding. Presently, he picks up tinder sticks, sets them atop the fabric and braces them with sash so that they will act as bumpers. Holding his breath, he pulls the cord tight.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)
Jesus goddamn!

Beads of sweat run down his pained face, and he glances at the clouds.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)
Sorry.

With tremulous hands, the cowboy knots the rope atop his makeshift cast.

EXT. BARREN ROCKY INCLINE - EARLY EVENING

The sunless sky purples. Employing his crutch, Arthur ambles up the incline, his hat on his head, a rucksack over his left shoulder and a gun on his right hip. He glances at the ground and quickly locates four stones that lie in a straight line, directing him west.

ARTHUR
Thanks Sheriff.

EXT. DECLINING SLOPE - THREE IN THE MORNING

The moon is on the wane. Arthur ambles down the slope, fighting the insistent tug of gravity.

ARTHUR
Son of a bitch slope.

He reaches the intersecting column of hoofprints, which are marked with four stones that lie at a forty-five degree angle to his current route.

After a loud SNEEZE, the cowboy pivots on his crutch and SLAMS to the ground.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)
Son of a bitch slope!

Arthur WHACKS the ground with his palm, reaches for his crutch, rises, YELLS and falls again. He glares at his right leg and SPITS.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)
You won't stop me.

The cowboy reaches into his rucksack and withdraws the bottle that is labelled, 'Tincture of Opium.' He bites the cork, wrests it loose, pours a very small amount of the amber medicine into his cupped palm and SIPS.

EXT. DECLINING SLOPE WITH SPARSE VEGETATION - DAWN

The eastern horizon brightens. Arthur advances northwest, YAWNS, stumbles, SLAMS to the ground and GRUNTS.

The cowboy pulls the boot off of his injured leg and upends it. Blood trickles to the thirsty ground, agglutinates and turns into red beads. After a derisive SNORT, he glances at his exposed sock, which is bright scarlet, deep carmine and muddy brown.

Arthur looks east. Morning light strikes his face, and he squints.

ARTHUR
You watchin'? You seein' all this clear?

He pulls the grimy boot back over his right foot, slings his rucksack, claims his crutch and rises.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)
This's why I prayed my whole life. For help right now.

Arthur returns his attention to the sloping terrain, continues forward and passes a line of stones.

EXT. DECLINING SLOPE WITH SPARSE VEGETATION - MORNING

A YAWN spreads across the cowboy's weary face, and his eyelids grow heavy. In front of him is his shadow, stretched long by the morning sun.

ARTHUR
Son of-
(he YAWNS)
-a bitch tincture.

Arthur swings his legs forward, and his right hand slips. He plants his boots, YELLS and falters, though somehow remains upright. In front of him, his two-dimensional sibling wavers.

His eyelids close, and he falls asleep, standing like a tripod on his crutch and one good leg. A hot wind blows, tilting his hat and carrying the sound of an EERIE WHISTLE.

Arthur starts awake, draws his gun and SLAMS to the ground. He surveys the area, but sees nothing that causes him any concern. An instant later, his eyelids close.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)
Not here.

The cowboy punches the ground, opens his eyes, claims his crutch and rises.

EXT. SOTOL BUSHES / DEFILE ENTRANCE - MOMENTS LATER

Entering the wide defile, Arthur YAWNS. He sees the sotol bushes that run along the northern wall, pivots toward them, stumbles and lands on his good knee.

After tossing his crutch at the shrubs, the cowboy crawls across the grit, dragging his bad leg like a tail. He wedges himself in the narrow space in-between the yard-high growths and the hard mountain wall, drinks the small remainder of one of his three canteens, sets the empty vessel on the ground and surveys the rocks nearby. Amongst them, he descries a heavy stone, which he claims, hefts with both hands and pounds against the container, CLANK, CLANK, until it is flat.

Arthur pulls its strap behind his neck, and the dangling metal covers the major part of his upper chest like a breastplate. YAWNING, he sets the rock near the edge of the bushes and places his hat atop it so that it resembles his sleeping head.

Shielded by sotol bushes, stone and steel, the bleary cowboy lies down and passes out.

INT. CENTRAL DEN / THE TROGLODYTES' CAVE - SAME

Wolf Skull, the Serrated Tomahawk and LACKEY enter the central den, and as they pass through, a flickering light inside the eastern alcove garners their attentions. They approach the prison, lean over and see Sheriff Hunt, holding the glimmering whisky flask, its nozzle pressed to his lips as he GULPS, pretending to drink. Behind him sits Chicory, pointing at the vessel, acting.

CHICORY
Let me have some of that! It's delicious!

Wolf Skull withdraws a bone knife from a leather sheath, and across the way, Samantha's stomach sinks.

SAMANTHA
Sheriff.

The sworn man continues to feign libation and GULP air.

Wolf Skull thrusts his knife between the posts, and its tip CLINKS against the glimmering flask.

Sheriff Hunt offers the open container to the troglodyte, who snatches it away and withdraws, flanked by the other natives.

Wolf Skull tips the flask on its side, and amber fluid drains from its nozzle. Sheriff Hunt's stomach sinks; Chicory's eyes widen; Samantha's breath catches.

SHERIFF HUNT
(muttered)
Drink it.

Wolf Skull rights the vessel and SNIFFS its remainder.

SHERIFF HUNT (CONT'D)
(muttered)
Drink it.

The native drinks from the flask, GULPS once and stops, SMACKING his lips distastefully.

CHICORY
It has to taste better than people.

Wolf Skull SPITS a small amount into the coals, which CRACKLE, and hands the flask to the Serrated Tomahawk, who claims it and drinks three full GULPS. The Lackey reaches for the vessel, but knocks it to the floor, where it CLATTERS, spins and spills.

SHERIFF HUNT
Blast.

CHICORY
Damnation.

The clumsy subordinate fetches the flask, drinks the dripping residual and tosses the container onto the coals, where it hops, spitting blue flames. Wiping his lips, Wolf Skull departs through the east hall, followed by the other natives.

Samantha and Sheriff Hunt make eye contact.

SAMANTHA
The one with the wolf skull will lose consciousness for a long period of time, but may live. The second drinker will die, and the last one will not be affected.

SHERIFF HUNT
All right.

Sheriff Hunt rubs his bandaged fingers and exhales through his nose, disappointed.

CHICORY
Two more is respectable.

Across the way, Samantha grows morose.

SAMANTHA
So my husband will face at least seven of them. Including that huge one with the Boar Tusks.

CHICORY
Arthur O'Dwyer is a very determined man.

SAMANTHA
And crippled.

EXT. SOTOL BUSHES / DEFILE ENTRANCE - MOMENTS LATER

The sun illuminates the defile. The Misshapen Troglodyte and Sharp Teeth are currently approaching the sotol bushes behind which Arthur sleeps. The disfigured fellow carries a bow fitted with a bird skull arrow, and the latter grips a bone tomahawk.

Across the grit they quietly pad, monitoring the hat and boots of their sleeping prey, who SNORES erratically.

The Misshapen Troglodyte draws his arrow and releases. The shaft lances the cowboy's hat and CRACKS on the rock below.

Startled awake, Arthur sweeps his gun in a blind arc through the bushes, squeezing the trigger, BANG, BANG, BANG, BANG. The first two bullets go wide, but the third and forth impact the right arm and chest of Sharp Teeth, knocking him over.

The Misshapen Troglodyte fits a second arrow to his bow, and the cowboy aims at his lopsided face.

ARTHUR
Don't!

The troglodyte pulls twine, and Arthur fires, BANG. Bone CRACKS, and the native's head jerks back, but he remains upright, skeletal splinters protruding from the gash in the side of his thick skull. Again, he draws on his bowstring.

The cowboy squeezes his trigger, BANG. The native's bow SHATTERS, splintering, and his chest spits blood, but still he remains upright.

Arthur opens his revolver and dumps the spent cartridges to the ground, while five yards away, the Misshapen Troglodyte picks up the bone tomahawk.

With shaking fingers, the cowboy plucks two bullets from his cartridge belt and slots them into grooves. The bleeding Troglodyte hastens forward.

Arthur SNAPS the cylinder. A shadow covers him, and he raises the gun. GUNSHOTS flash; the axe comes down.

Salmon-gray clumps burst from the native's skull, and the tomahawk CLANKS against the flattened canteen that covers the cowboy's chest.

WHISTLING from his neck, the brainless Troglodyte THUDS upon the ground. Arthur flings his cylinder, dumps out spent cartridges, loads six new ones, SNAPS his weapon shut and looks around, pulse racing.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)
Awake now.

The cowboy looks at the Misshapen Troglodyte, focusing on the cluster of white pipes that protrude from the swollen slit across his throat.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)
Is that jewelry?

He crawls to the body and pulls on the protrusion, but cannot wrest it loose.

An idea occurs to him.

Arthur withdraws his hunting knife, pokes its point into the dead man's neck and cuts around the cluster of pipes, sawing through skin, sinew and venous matter.

After completing a full circuit, he sheathes his blade, grips the anomalous extrusion and pulls. Bones CRACK and SNAP, and the throat pipes comes loose, trailing tendons and nerves.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)
Goddamn abomination.

He cuts the dangling cords, wipes gore from the stolen anatomy, puts it in his pocket, dons his cowboy hat, slings his rucksack, reclaims his crutch and rises from the stained ground, the flattened canteen depending from his neck.

EXT. WIDE DEFILE - SAME

Arthur advances along the defile, his gait much steadier than it was before his rest. As he proceeds, he scarfs some nuts and a nugget of hard cheese.

An EERIE WHISTLE sounds from the south, and is answered by one in the north. Inexorably, the cowboy continues west.

Upon the wall to his right hang the skulls of a boar, a wolf and a vulture, which he passes without pause.

Arthur swings his legs forward, leans on his good foot, swings his crutch forward, squeezes his hand grip, sees something on the ground and stops.

Presently, he appraises the dirt, which evinces signs of a struggle and is peppered with globs of agglutinated blood. Amongst the various markings, he sees two drag marks that lead away from the confrontation and disappear around the blind corner ninety feet away.

ARTHUR
(muttered)
This is where it capsized.

Nearby, Arthur sees something of interest-- two sets of footprints that were made by bare feet. He follows these tracks to the south wall where they disappear inside of a narrow hidden passage.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)
(muttered)
The back way.

EXT. NARROW GULCH - SAME

Arthur's shoulders and crutch rub against stone as he enters the slender gulch, and his progression along the tight passage is not much easier.

After fifteen awkward strides, he nears a blind corner and stops. There, the cowboy lies upon the ground, draws his gun, points it forward and produces the purloined throat pipes, which he places against his mouth like he would a harmonica. He SPITS out dangling veins, purses his lips and blows, sounding the EERIE WHISTLE for three seconds.

There is no response.

After securing the crutch to his back, he crawls forward, dragging his bad leg, throat pipes in his mouth, revolver in his right hand.

The distance between the cowboy and the bend diminishes to several yards, and again he pauses and blows, producing the EERIE WHISTLE.

An answering WHISTLE comes from around the corner, followed by quick FOOTFALLS.

The cowboy prostrates himself, and a YOUNG TROGLODYTE steps into view.

Arthur squeezes his trigger, BANG, BANG, BANG, and a flung bone tomahawk whirls over his back. The native SLAMS into the gulch wall and collapses, SKIRLING.

The cowboy fires again, BANG, and the Young Troglodyte's throat pipes SHATTER.

Silence returns to the gulch.

Arthur proceeds on his hands and good knee to the corner, around which he peers. Ahead of him, the gulch widens and slopes down. He pockets the throat pipes and crawls onward, dragging his padded leg and carrying his many burdens as if he were some bizarre tortoise.

Sweat drips from his face as he nears the end of the passage, beyond which shines clear daylight.

Arthur pauses, prostrates himself and blows into the throat pipes, but the EERIE WHISTLE receives no reply.

Presently, he crawls to the mouth, leans behind a stone and looks out. In the open space stands a leafless tree, from the branches of which hang human skulls that have cracked domes wherein birds die or decompose amongst thorny weeds. The cowboy looks up at the sky, angry.

ARTHUR
You seein' this?

Arthur crawls to the edge of the gulch and surveys the troglodytes' burial ground, where he sees piles of rocks, sticks surmounted by animal skulls, assorted obscure markers, a leafless tree that upholds gray entrails, a round perimeter of flat stones and the mouth of a cave.

Looking at the dark opening, the cowboy draws his gun and flings the cylinder.

INT. CENTRAL DEN / THE TROGLODYTES' CAVE - SAME

Sheriff Hunt, Chicory and Samantha sit inside their alcoves, staring at the headless birds that lie within reach just beyond the posts.

SHERIFF HUNT
Mrs. O'Dwyer?

SAMANTHA
Yes?

SHERIFF HUNT
Have you eaten anything since they took you?

SAMANTHA
A little.

SHERIFF HUNT
If it's been longer than a couple of days, you should eat some of that bird they gave you.

Samantha raises her gaze from the headless creature and looks across the coals at Sheriff Hunt.

SAMANTHA
Why?

SHERIFF HUNT
Your body needs sustenance.

SAMANTHA
They wouldn't want us to grow lean.

The sworn man does not reply, and a heavy silence spreads throughout the den. Presently, the woman leans against the wall and shuts her eyes.

CHICORY
I've been thinking a lot about the flea circus.
(he looks at the sheriff)
Remember when it came to Bright Hope?

SHERIFF HUNT
I remember.

CHICORY
Did you go?

SHERIFF HUNT
I wasn't able to.

CHICORY
I went with Nadine. It was run by these two European men-- they were brothers--possibly identical twins-- though one was a little bit taller than the other, so that might disqualify them. I can't remember their name.

SAMANTHA
The Struckbergers.

The lawmen look across the way.

CHICORY
You saw it?

SAMANTHA
Arthur wanted to go.

CHICORY
I don't know your opinion, but my wife said it was all tricks. Even after those brothers gave us magnifying glasses, and we saw the fleas pull that little stagecoach into the depot and roll those tiny canons across the battlefield, Nadine said it was just dead fleas glued to mechanical contraptions that worked on their own-- like timepieces or windups.
(he scratches his beard)
(MORE)

CHICORY (CONT'D)
Still, I thought it was real and I asked her to keep her voice down so the performers wouldn't hear, because who knows what kind of hearing fleas have or if they can sense friendliness in a voice like the way dogs can?
(he thinks)
They drink dog blood, so maybe.
(he scratches his nape)
But I think it's real. I believe that those fleas are alive and talented.

SAMANTHA
Many flea circuses employ tricks, but the Struckbergers use real living fleas.

CHICORY
I knew it was authentic! I just felt it. Thanks for verifying that for me.

SAMANTHA
You're welcome.

Sheriff Hunt looks at the woman, nods his head and mouths the words, 'thank you.' Samantha flashes a complicitous wink.

EERIE WHISTLES and louder SKIRLS echo in the western hallway, followed by the SCRAPING sound of something heavy being dragged across the stone floor.

The captives all have the same fearful thought.

SAMANTHA (CONT'D)
(whispered)
Arthur?

The Lackey enters the den, wearing the sheriff's holster and gun, dragging the dead, poisoned body of the Serrated Tomahawk by the ankle. He walks over to the alcove that contains the lawmen and sits the corpse upright, directly beside the posts.

CHICORY
Looks like he figured it out.

SHERIFF HUNT
Appears so.

FOOTFALLS resound in the hallway and throat pipes BLAST, startling the captives.

Into the room strides Boar Tusks, the massive Troglodyte chieftain, gripping his huge bone tomahawk as well as Brooder's repeater rifle.

Samantha's eyes sparkle with tears, and Chicory starts to tremble. Sheriff Hunt, burning with dire hatred, stares directly at the leader who scalped and bisected Nick.

Boar Tusks points at the sworn man, tilts his head back and BLASTS his throat pipes.

CHICORY
No! Take me-
(he SLAPS his chest)
I'm ready. I'm ready to see my wife.

The Lackey withdraws two pegs from the wall and slides the freed posts from the ground. Without hesitation, Sheriff Hunt lunges through the opening, directly at Boar Tusks.

The huge leader CRACKS Brooder's rifle against the side of the sworn man's head.

Sheriff Hunt SLAMS against the floor, and Chicory is shoved back into the alcove by the subordinate, who then slots the missing posts, CLACK, CLACK, and fits the pegs, CLACK, CLACK. On the far side of the den, Samantha watches, stunned and hopeless, gripping the barricade.

Boar Tusks steps on Sheriff Hunt's neck, pinning him to the ground, and the subordinate winds a rope around his boots, binding them together.

CHICORY (CONT'D)
Get up sheriff!

Sheriff Hunt, half-conscious, fettered, pinned to the floor by the foot on his throat, summons what strength he has and POUNDS his good fist against the leg of his captor. Boar Tusks STOMPS on his neck. The sworn man's skull SMACKS against the stone, and he passes out.

CHICORY (CONT'D)
Wake up!

Boar Tusks SKIRLS, and the Lackey RIPS open Sheriff Hunt's shirt, exposing his pale stomach.

Samantha looks away.

The Lackey walks to the pit and surveys the luminous coals. With a thick piece of leather, he claims the whisky flask, which glows red with heat, warping the air.

Chicory pales.

Boar Tusks presses the sharp edge of his bone tomahawk against Sheriff Hunt’s bare stomach and drags it across, cutting through skin, tissue and muscle.

CHICORY (CONT'D)
Stop! Stop!

Blood spills from the wound. Sheriff Hunt awakens, confused, CHOKING on the foot against his throat.

The Lackey shoves the glowing flask into the incision.

Blood HISSES and flesh CRACKLES. Kicking the floor and CHOKING, the red-faced lawman stares hatefully into the eyes of Boar Tusks.

CHICORY (CONT'D)
Sheriff! I’ll make sure you’re avenged! I’ll make sure of it!

A GUNSHOT resounds, startling the captives. Smoke rises from the muzzle of Brooder’s repeater rifle, and blood pours from a bullet hole in Sheriff Hunt’s left arm.

Boar Tusks presses the barrel of the weapon against the sworn man’s testicles.

Chicory looks away. Sheriff Hunt shuts his eyes. The chieftain pulls the trigger, and the hammer CLINKS upon the spent round still in the chamber. Again, he squeezes the trigger, CLINK. The sworn man opens his eyes, and the oldster CACKLES.

CHICORY (CONT'D)
That dumb imbecile doesn’t know how to reload!

A drop of blood steals from the grin on Sheriff Hunt’s red and shaking face.

From the western hallway comes the sound of an EERIE WHISTLE.

Boar Tusks looks at the other native and SKIRLS his throat pipes. Presently, Lackey departs.

The chieftain sets his tomahawk down and shakes Brooder’s rifle with both hands, dry firing, CLINK, CLINK, CLINK. Jarred loose, the trigger guard swings forward and CLICKS, ejecting an empty shell, which CLINKS upon the floor.

CHICORY (CONT'D)
Uh-oh.

Boar Tusks studies the dangling piece of metal and swings it back to its original position, CLACK, which loads a new bullet into the chamber.

Two GUNSHOTS flash within the western hallway, and the sound ignites a tiny flame of hope within Samantha, Chicory and Sheriff Hunt.

Boar Tusks points the repeater rifle toward the dark passage and fires, BANG. Presently, he lowers the trigger guard, CLICK, and lifts it, CLACK, and fires, BANG. The empty shell falls into Sheriff Hunt's mouth, and he SPITS it out.

SHERIFF HUNT
Arthur! One's in here with a-

A GUNSHOT precludes his sentence.

Smoke rises from the rifle, and blood drains from the bullet hole in Sheriff Hunt's chest.

Chicory pales, horrified by the sight.

Sheriff Hunt WHEEZES and COUGHS up blood.

Boar Tusks reloads, CLICK-CLACK, and the spent shell bounces off of the lawman's right eye and CLINKS on the ground, where it rolls. Rifle aimed, the massive troglodyte turns toward the dark passage ready to kill the intruder.

Sheriff Hunt lunges, claims the bone tomahawk, swings, and severs the front half of the native's right foot.

Halted, the injured native ROARS.

A gun flashes in the hall, BANG, BANG, BANG.

Two bullets CRACK Boar Tusks's ribs, knocking him backward, and the rifle CLATTERS on stone.

Boar Tusks THUDS against the ground and BLASTS his throat pipes at Sheriff Hunt, who rises to his knees, raises the bone tomahawk over his head, COUGHS blood, WHEEZES and brings the axe down. The edge bites deep into the native's neck, CRACKING vertebrae. After wresting the weapon free, the sworn man swings again and hacks out a gory wedge of bone and tubes. The next blow severs the remaining flap of skin, and the chieftain's head rolls, its protuberant boar tusks CLICKING across the stone.

A SCRAPING noise garners the attentions of Sheriff Hunt, Samantha and Chicory, and they look toward the western hall.

From the darkness crawls the cowboy, gun in hand, crutch on his back, dragging his bad leg.

SAMANTHA
Arthur!

Arthur sees Samantha, and tears of relief roll down his face. Trembling and speechless, he crosses himself with his gun.

SHERIFF HUNT
How many did you get?

The cowboy clears his throat.

ARTHUR
Three others.

SHERIFF HUNT
Then there are three more. At least.

The cowboy crawls beside his wife, kisses her, leans against the wooden posts, flings his cylinder and reloads.

ARTHUR
Brooder?

SHERIFF HUNT
Gone.

ARTHUR
You gonna make it?

SHERIFF HUNT
No.

Tears fills Chicory’s eyes, and his open mouth trembles.

ARTHUR
You positive?

SHERIFF HUNT
I am.
(he looks at Chicory)
Deputy.

The backup deputy wipes his eyes and clears his throat.

CHICORY
Yessir.

SHERIFF HUNT
I'm stayin' here-- I intend to finish off the rest of the males since-
(he WHEEZES)
-since they know about Bright Hope, and I won't survive anyhow. I want you to escort the O'Dwyers back home-- make sure they get there safe. Take my gun off of that one in the hall.

The oldster SNIFFS and wipes his eyes.

CHICORY
Yessir.

Arthur rises on his crutch, pulls two pegs from the east wall and slides the freed posts from the ground. Samantha crawls from her alcove, stands up and embraces her husband.

SAMANTHA
How's your leg?

ARTHUR
Help Chicory.

Sheriff Hunt tries to pull the flask from his stomach, but it pulls his innards and makes him YELL, so he leaves it in. Presently, he checks the number of rounds in the rifle.

Samantha discards two posts and helps Chicory to his feet.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)
Sheriff. Anything I can do for you?

SHERIFF HUNT
Go out the way you came in.
(he COUGHS blood)
Don't dawdle.

The woman and the oldster join the cowboy and look at the sworn man.

SAMANTHA
Thank you.

SHERIFF HUNT
Get goin'.

Arthur tips his hat in gratitude and ambles from the room, followed by Samantha.

Chicory looks at Sheriff Hunt, through sparkling eyes and three decades of friendship.

SHERIFF HUNT (CONT'D)
Have a talk with Mr. O'Dwyer.

CHICORY
It is the official opinion of the backup deputy that a talk with him is a very good idea.

SHERIFF HUNT
All right. And say goodbye to my wife for me.
(he WHEEZES)
I'll say hello to yours.

CHICORY
Yessir.

The sworn man points to the western hallway, and the backup deputy turns away and follows after the O'Dwyers.

Propped up against the wall, Sheriff Hunt SPITS blood, looks into the darkness of the eastern passageway and fans the trigger guard, CLICK-CLACK. The ejected cartridge flies into the air.

INT. REAR TUNNEL / THE TROGLODYTES' CAVE - SAME

The sound of the empty shell CLINKING on stone echoes in the corridor through which Arthur advances, holding his gun and his crutch. Samantha follows behind her husband and is succeeded by Chicory, who pauses to claim the sheriff's revolver from the dead Lackey troglodyte.

The cowboy holds up his hand. His wife stops, and the oldster steps to the side and raises his gun. Presently, Arthur presses the purloined throat pipes to his lips and blows, producing the EERIE WHISTLE (and surprising Chicory and Samantha).

No reply issues from around the corner.

ARTHUR
(quietly)
Don't look at the shelves.

SAMANTHA
(quietly)
I've seen them.

The three continue around the bend and enter a wider space that has eight horizontal nooks in its walls. Occupying two of the compartments are nude PREGNANT TROGLODYTES who have sticks in their eye sockets and callused stumps at the ends of their arms and legs. Chicory is sickened by the sight of the mutilated women, and Samantha stares at them, morose.

SAMANTHA (CONT'D)
We should-

ARTHUR
We can't. Let's keep on.

Arthur swings his legs forward and is followed by Samantha and Chicory.

CHICORY
Maybe a cavalry can get them.

The cowboy peers around a corner and is struck by golden twilight. After a quick survey, he advances toward the luminous opening at the far end, trailing a long shadow upon which his wife and the oldster tread.

INT/EXT. BURIAL GROUND/CAVE ENTRANCE - SAME

Arthur, Samantha and Chicory reach the cavern mouth that overlooks the burial ground. After an appraisal of the sacred region, the oldster SPITS and gestures with his gun.

CHICORY
This must be the troglodyte fair ground.

The cowboy draws Chicory's spyglass from his pack, extends it and looks west, its lens glaring.

CHICORY (CONT'D)
Home is the other way.

ARTHUR
I wanna quit these mountains directly.

CHICORY
It is the official opinion of the-

SAMANTHA
I need to look at your leg.

ARTHUR
Once we're clear.

Arthur ambles past the tree of skulls, followed by Samantha and Chicory, who is busy scanning the sun-limned environment with his spyglass. Ahead of the party on a rocky facade is a dark vertical line-- an opening.

EXT. NARROW DEFILE IN THE RIDGE - MOMENTS LATER

The trio enters the defile into which Buddy and Purvis strayed more than half a month prior. After several strides, the cowboy stops and is joined by his wife and the oldster.

Arthur blows into the throat pipes, producing the EERIE WHISTLE. The sound dies and is not answered. Presently, they continue forward and pass by the pair of vulture skulls.

EXT. INCLINED EDGE OF THE MOUNTAIN RIDGE - DUSK

The sun is gone, and the sky and terrain are saturate azure. The trio descends from the ridge and lands upon dusty grass, where the woman withdraws a kerchief, which she dampens with canteen water and offers to her husband.

SAMANTHA
I'd like a proper kiss, but-
(she shudders)
-those things that you've been putting in your mouth.

The cowboy grins, accepts the cloth, wipes his lips, rinses with canteen water, GARGLES, SPITS, wipes again and kisses his wife, who receives him fully.

Somewhere in the distance, a GUNSHOT echoes, followed a moment later by two more GUNSHOTS.

Chicory and the O'Dwyers looks at the mountain range.

SAMANTHA (CONT'D)
Were those gunshots?

CHICORY
They were.

A sad smile shines upon the oldster's wrinkled face.

CHICORY (CONT'D)
Sheriff Hunt's still shooting people.

EXT. CLEARING IN A FORESTED AREA - EARLY EVENING

A pit fire CRACKLES in the center of a clearing where Chicory fills a tin plate with water from a small pond and Samantha unwinds the sash from around Arthur's injured shin. After setting aside the cord, the woman unrolls the padding, revealing a pant leg that is hard and brown with dried blood. Breath held, she raises the cuff and looks at the leg, which is crusty, swollen and dark red. The cowboy, anxious and silent, awaits her verdict.

CHICORY
How is it?

SAMANTHA
It looks a little worse.

ARTHUR
Only a little?

A smile brightens Samantha's face, and chills of relief cascade down Arthur's back. The woman hugs her husband.

SAMANTHA
Thank God, thank God.

CHICORY
That's terrific news.

The water in the tin plate starts to boil, and Chicory sets it beside the O'Dwyers.

CHICORY (CONT'D)
I'd like to think that my antebellum medical techniques had a positive affect.

ARTHUR
They hurt like they did.

Samantha wrings excess moisture from a steaming towel and sets it upon Arthur's shin, eliciting a GRUNT.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)
Does it have to be so hot?

SAMANTHA
You practically have barnacles.

CHICORY
Do whatever you think is called for, Mrs. O'Dwyer. A sheriff needs to have two working legs.

The O'Dwyers are puzzled by the remark.

ARTHUR
What're you talkin' about?

CHICORY
A one-legged sheriff can be tripped by anyone, but a limping sheriff has real character and always knows where his feet are.

ARTHUR
Where'd you get this notion about me bein' a sheriff?

CHICORY
Sheriff Franklin Hunt and the backup deputy discussed it. And after the way you dispatched those troglodytes and rescued us, I know for certain that you'd get the position.

Arthur glances at Samantha and looks at the ground.

ARTHUR
I'm supposed to boss a cattle crew. If I hadn't hurt my leg, I would've been way up in-

The cowboy stops himself, glances at his wife and tilts his head down, ruminating. Presently, he plucks a few blades of grass, tosses them aside and looks at the oldster.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)
But I like this sheriff idea.
(he nods his head)
'Cause I wouldn't be away from Samantha. I could protect her--and other folks--and be in charge of how things run, just like a foreman does.
(he looks at his wife)
That sound good?

Samantha, eyes bright with joy, nods her head fervently.

SAMANTHA
Exceptionally good.

ARTHUR
So I'll be sheriff then.

Arthur remembers something, reaches inside his jacket and pulls out the letter, which is crinkled and stained with sweat and blood. Samantha sees it and LAUGHS.

The cowboy looks at Chicory.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)
Can we have a little privacy? I promised I'd read this out loud and I ain't no orator.

CHICORY
What is it? A poem?

ARTHUR
It ain't a-

Samantha presses her lips to her husband's mouth, silencing his reply with a deep kiss.

CHICORY
Those must be some pretty words.

Cut to black.

The End.